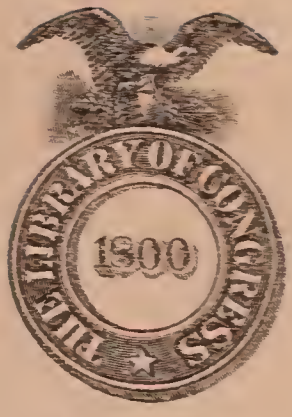
THE BACK OF THE BOOK

MARGARET LEECH



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By MARGARET LEECH

"Answers to the problems will be found in the back of the book."
Preface to an old arithmetic.

BONI AND LIVERIGHT
PUBLISHERS :: :: NEW YORK

Printed in the United States of America

To
R. T. L.

I

THE BACK OF THE BOOK

CHAPTER I

i

In a crisp, beneficent hush of falling snow, Vergie Stilson was walking westward across Central Park. Dimly about her, with an aspect of lonely winter landscape, rose the miniature slopes which next day the children's sleds would wear smooth; and through the whitened dusk, which was like a dotted veil before her face, she saw the shapes of buildings, huge and yellow-eyed.

An hour ago she had felt the weariness of her long day at the office, but a cup of tea by the fire in Harriet's living room had refreshed her; and she moved elastically over the thickly powdered walks of the park, which recalled winter roads in Hillsdale, where her childhood had been spent. Her mind was quick with swirling thoughts. Sometimes she spoke a few words aloud, inhaling sharply the frosty air, which was clotted with crystals of snow.

A dancing energy in her brain made magical the snow, the lighted buildings, her vagrant memories;

transformed and irradiated them. She felt a power to see through things, behind things, to apprehend a significance latent in objects and ideas, which seemed clarified, like a substance, apparently opaque, behind which a light has been set. And among the other things, she saw herself most clearly. She had a secret cult of herself, of her moods and reactions and interests. Tonight, once more, in her solitary mind its incense ascended.

Yet all the while that she walked with springing, jubilant strides and thoughts which whirled and eddied like the snowflakes, there was an impatience which pricked, without impairing, her exhilaration. It was associated, this impatience, with the irksome routine of the day just past and the domestic dinner table which lay ahead. Vergie's life, judged by externals, wasn't exciting, transmuted as it—as all living—seemed at that moment. She was in the habit of graceful submission to its humdrum course, less because of complacency than arrogance. These years she recognized as a preliminary to the greater things; and she had endured their passing without disquiet, as an explorer, shortly bound for perilous exploits, might relish the monotony of an evening by the fireside.

When she had left college, her education formally accomplished, Vergie had expected to find the greater things almost at once. She had set out, very confidently, after them. But, so far, there had been

no discoveries worthy of the name. At twenty-eight Vergie was still awaiting them. Her expectancy, her conviction of the unusual fate reserved for her, persisted; yet twenty-eight years leave an imprint on the most buoyant temperament. Vergie was beginning to suspect that there might be something ridiculous in regarding one's self indefinitely as a person of brilliant promise.

It was possible that, on this particular evening, Harriet had had a share in intensifying her impatience. Harriet was so complacent over her home, her husband. Well, getting married was easy enough, some corner of Vergie's mind reasoned. She might have married—lots of times. She had been very close to marrying Roger; fortunately she had realized in time what a mistake their marriage would have been. But she was far from unattractive, Vergie reassured herself. She wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty enough to make up for the fact that she was clever. Her face had an amusing triangular shape, wide of brow, piquant of chin. It could turn naughty and mocking; it could be large-eyed and demure, when the occasion demanded.

Odd how the trivial speculations of her vanity could run on under the dancing thoughts! As she left the park and entered a stretch of blurred white street, Vergie's mind turned again to Harriet and to her living room, as feminine as a breath of perfume. Her own living room, she determined, would

be different; it would have the subtlety of association, a flavor of antiquity, a less emasculated prettiness. And, adorning with phrases the atmosphere which she felt to be natively hers, Vergie decided that she was a more intricate and important person than Harriet, though not so calmly beautiful.

ii

Vergie briskly completed her walk across town. Turning into Riverside Drive, she discerned, between the burdened trees, across the blackness of water, the steeps of the opposite shore, picked with lights. Because of the aspect of unreality in which the storm had dressed the accustomed scene, Vergie saw it pictorially, as though she were looking on it for the first time; and recollection came to her of the day, almost fifteen years past, when the view had been new and thrilling. Holding her baby sister's hand, she had turned with a fast-beating heart from the river to the sweeping crescent of monster apartment houses, warmly gray in the afternoon light. In their immensity she had discovered a movement and a challenge which had never bloomed for her in the gentle dooryards of Hillsdale.

The recollection faded as Vergie hurried into the entrance of one of the houses, suddenly aware that she was late. The movement of the elevator seemed almost unendurably slow. As she opened the door of the Stilson apartment, a broken murmur of talk

and desultory clash of silver and china told her that her family was at dinner.

"Did you get wet?" her mother called solicitously. Vergie, removing her snow-dampened clothing and hastily preparing for the meal, saw the heavy, not unkindly face, seamed from preoccupation with physical routine. She went into the dining room and found them, just as she knew they would be, her mother and her father and her sister.

Nellie Lowe had been nearly twenty-seven when she married Harry Stilson, one of the most eligible bachelors in the town of Hillsdale. She was, at that time, a pretty brunette of superabundant figure and high spirits. In the secret dreams of her prolonged girlhood, she had drawn the picture of a romantic hero; and she had found small difficulty in applying the accumulated idealism of her imaginings to Harry Stilson, tall, wavy-haired and urbane, who could turn a verse for an autograph album as gallantly as he danced the schottische. She had made him a devoted wife, though she had not understood her husband, or been deeply moved by his passion. In time, she translated her emotions into the terms in which she came to see life, terms of duty and fidelity and physical comfort; so that a direct memory of her earlier transports of imagination would have filled her with incredulity and shame.

A daughter was born to the pair about a year after their marriage, and on three subsequent oc-

casions their hopes for another baby were disappointed by a fatally premature birth. Not until Vergie was ten did she, with the arrival of a small sister, lose the distinction of being an only child. A few years later they had come to New York. Harry Stilson had accepted the position of manager of the New York office of his firm which was engaged in the manufacture of overalls. It was an excellent position, and his wife had gradually grown accustomed to the marble magnificence of the entrance to her new home. With characteristic provincialism, they carried to the city the standards and manners of a small community. In the apartment house where they lived, their neighborliness secured them friends with whom they enjoyed evenings of talk and cards. They were active members of a Broadway church.

Mrs. Stilson's prettiness was not of the sort which could resist the years. The circles under her dark eyes had deepened and blackened, and her face had grown too heavy for the little, coarsening features. Her mouth turned down fretfully at the corners, though a ghost of its old charm came to visit it when she smiled. Her figure, which had been ripe, grew ponderous and unshapely with maturity, and she walked with a slight limp because of her rheumatism.

Harry Stilson, for his part, had slowly withered into a dignified and old-fashioned middle age. Per-

haps because of undue absorption in the business of overalls, he had lost the gallantry and urbanity which had been signally his in the '80's; if a fragrance of that youth persisted, it was no more than the breath of a desiccated violet. Little physical sign of it remained, save the long fingers with which of an evening he caressed the bowl of his pipe. His slenderness had grown gaunt; his waving hair was thinned and antiquarian; and the wing collars of his young manhood, like his rare jokes of the same period, seemed an almost venerable survival of another epoch.

He read widely, and outside the duties of his business which he discharged with exactitude, he was inclined to be absent-minded, lost in meditations of his own. If it occurred to him at times that his romantic youth had found small fulfilment, he gave no indication of the fact.

iii

Vergie took her place at the dinner table. The maid brought a plate of food which had been kept warm in the oven, and set it before her.

"What made you so late," asked her mother on a note of mild complaint, "an awful night like this?"

"It's almost stopped snowing," said Vergie. "I left the office early, and went up to have tea with Harriet. Then I walked home through the park. It was wonderful—like being in the country."

Mrs. Stilson's face assumed an expression of martyrdom patiently endured.

"You never will be old enough to learn sense," she said, beginning to serve the dessert. "If it was Pet, I could understand it."

Thus implicated in a lack of judgment, Pet looked up from the pattern she was pressing into the table-cloth with her spoon.

"I'm going out with Frank tonight," she said suddenly. She glanced at the faces of her parents with an uncertain defiance, thinly veiled with non-chalance.

"You ought not to be slopping around the streets at night in such weather," said her mother, who had a genius for selecting repugnant verbs. "That finishes Frank for me. I should think he'd have more sense than to ask you." But her protest had an ineffectual ring.

"Oh, what harm does it do to go out in the snow?" said Pet. "Everyone else does. I can't tell Frank you make such a baby of me." She parted her lips as if she intended to add something, then closed them again in a red pouting curve. For a moment she seemed to consider refusing her pudding, but thought better of it and presently began to eat.

Vergie looked across the table at her sister. Her eyes were clear, her cheeks firm and curved as the petal of a bud. She was fair, but otherwise very much the obviously attractive girl her mother had

been. The figure under her close-fitting sweater was fuller than Vergie's.

"Her lips look juicy," Vergie thought. "How disgusting of me!"

"Anyway," Pet was saying in continuation of her own defense, "I never know when I can have people in here. Vergie's always wanting to use the living room. When you were my age," she went on, looking at her sister, "I was a baby and you had the place to yourself."

"When I was your age," said Vergie, "I had to take you out coasting. What a life that was! Tonight in the park I passed the place we used to go. Can you remember, Pet——"

"No, I don't remember." Pet rose from the table and went into the hall. From her pocket she drew a small white comb, with which she arranged her short, tawny hair. She pulled on a felt hat with a bunch of quills, and came sauntering back to the dining room.

"Frank's coming early," she said.

"Pet, that sweater is too tight for you," Vergie told her. "It's awful the way it shows your figure."

"Well, there's nothing the matter with my figure, is there?" Pet looked at her sister with the triumph of one who has produced a gem of repartee. And Vergie did not answer. She was thinking that it was too bad she knew so little about Pet. Ten years

make a wide gap—yet there should have been some sympathy, some understanding, between them.

The bell rang and Pet bounded to the hall. There was a sound of whispering and giggling. Evidently the real Pet was flowering there, away from the presence of her elders. She returned, radiant.

"We're going to the rink to skate for a while," she said. "Where're my skates, Mom?" She kissed her mother and father. "Good night, old girl," she called airily to Vergie.

"Don't stay out too late," said Mrs. Stilson, as one repeats a worn ritual without confidence in its efficacy.

There was more giggling in the hall, and the door slammed. In the silence which followed, Vergie suddenly thought, "We are three older people sitting here together. Youth has smiled on us and gone."

"Nellie"—Mr. Stilson addressed his wife—"I can just hear your mother telling you to get in early. Well, the young are all alike. You were a great one for skating when you were a girl."

"Yes," said Mrs. Stilson. "We all have to climb Fools' Hill." But her face was smiling. "I was crazy for a good time when I was Pet's age," she admitted.

Vergie sat staring at the tablecloth remembering with a curious elation other days, other nights; when she was eighteen.

iv

Presently they rose and moved across the hall to the living room. It was a comfortable place, made homelike by old mahogany, faded green draperies and many shelves of books. There was a deep, couch, and Vergie sat down on it. She seemed to grow smaller in her stillness and self-absorption: a little stoppered phial of thoughts.

"I'll tell you," her father was saying, "young folks nowadays don't half know what a good time is. . . ."

Vergie ceased to listen. Her mind was a swirling eddy, as it had been in the park. The energy of its processes was hypnotic. Memories seemed to flare and explode in her brain. Involuntarily she recalled emotions, crises of feeling and thought. It was wonderful, the plenitude, the richness of experience: life catching you, holding you, tossing you aside. Life slipping past. . . . The phrase washed over Vergie with a sick depression. Life slipping past; it wasn't just a phrase any more. She was twenty-eight. It was time to do something, to snatch back at many-colored life.

Unexpectedly she was shaking with excitement and a desperate resolution not to fail. And she thought how important her memories were. How they evoked things! Sometimes they concerned events which she had not thought of for months or even years. Yet they would suddenly appear with perfect distinct-

ness before her eyes, little colored moving pictures, with herself acting in them. She seemed to be an outsider—not Vergie, but someone watching Vergie and understanding deeply everything she thought and felt. Her memories were like the pages of a book of which she was the heroine.

Her mother stood looking out at the snow-covered street, the trees in the drifted park.

"An awful wind has come up," she said. "It's not fit for man or beast to be out tonight." She turned discontentedly from the window. "You aren't going over to the meeting, Harry?"

"No, I guess they'll have to get along without me this time." He slowly opened the evening paper.

The snug living room seemed to close in on Vergie. She rose from the couch. "I have a lot of letters that I simply must write tonight," she told her mother. Her tones tinkled lightly, casually. "I think I'll undress and shut myself up in my room for the evening. You don't care as long as father's here."

v

Vergie went down the hall to her room and, closing the door behind her, stood for a moment savoring her consciousness of escape. It was a little triumph, this being alone, this being free to think and feel, unobserved.

The room was furnished for the most part with

slender old pieces of light mahogany which had come from her grandmother's house in Hillsdale; and Vergie felt affection for the graceful highboy, the quaint dressing table, and the low, childish bed she had used for many years. Her possessions enfolded her with security and peace.

She examined her room deliberately, as a collector reviews familiar treasures. She wanted the satisfaction of recognition, approval, self-importance. On the wall hung a woodcut which Roger had given her, and Vergie's eyes rested on it. The picture showed a naked woman, lying beside a pool of water. The strong body was superbly extended in an attitude of sensual invitation. Vergie's eyes moved up the lithe limbs to the lifted breasts, the raised shoulder—how the head took you by surprise! It was turned aside over the shoulder, so that the eyes might look into the pool. The face, which showed no emotion—only self-appraisal, the chill of vanity—seemed not to belong to that passionate body. It was the face of a vain lady at her dressing table. The picture was called "Woman."

"Woman! It's too perfect!" It was Roger's voice, sounding clearly in Vergie's memory; and she smiled a little at hearing him. "You won't admit the truth of it, of course. But hang that picture in your room, as the old monks kept a skull in their cells—to remind you of what you are. There is woman's gesture of sensual allurement, there is her seeking

for a reflection of herself—in some pool, any pool. With this key it is quite simple to understand woman. A man must realize that she exists for the gratification of two things: her sensuality and her vanity. It is because the male is unable to conceive of a nature so elemental that he fails to understand her. For this reason he has been induced to accept her theory that she is incomprehensible to the male."

There might, Vergie admitted to the hush of her small room, be women like that. But it was stupid of Roger to generalize. The interesting women were the others: subtle, complex, intellectual. These were the women that men—even clever men like Roger—did not understand. Could she make them, she wondered? It would mean a fulfilment, an achievement, if she could perform this one thing: present faithfully, so that everyone could read, the development of a woman like herself.

While she undressed in the golden circle of light from the lamp beside her bed, Vergie saw her ambitions realized. The rug beneath her feet became a magic carpet on which she was carried to prestige, success, accomplishment; and her familiar room seemed suddenly estranged and transitory. The room and the life which it represented were only a phase, not established things. Vergie moved on, swiftly. She was the author of a half-dozen books. She was known as "our most sophisticated woman writer," "an author of brilliant subtlety," "a daring

psychologist." Her age was perhaps forty; she hardly looked it. Many men were her friends. Because she was always interesting and sympathetic, they preferred her society to that of fresher, younger women. Her appointments were exquisite and extravagant. She had a studio apartment, bright with flowers, where she gave intimate little dinners. Vergie pictured herself among them—those esoteric guests—rare and rather frail, with a costly, silken distinction to her. It was a pleasant scene to contemplate: Vergie the famous, the admired.

It was certainly possible that she might grow into a resemblance to her father or mother, and this idea marred the picture. But people, Vergie assured herself, made too much of heredity; you could be what you chose. It was only necessary to do something notable, to win recognition. Her writing would be the means to that. Now that she considered it, she was ashamed to think of the years she had wasted. Fame was waiting just around the corner. She was to blame for having delayed to meet it.

Over her nightgown, Vergie slipped a negligee of cherry-colored silk. The shade suited her, she thought, as before the mirror of her dressing table she adjusted the black wings of her hair. Powder and a trace of rouge were, with some sense of an appropriate gesture, applied; her lips must be car-

mine. She found perfume, cigarettes, pencil, a pad of yellow paper.

Vergie sat up in bed, pencil and paper in hand. Her brows were drawn in a frown which expressed concentration and a firm resolve. She would start at once to make an outline out of this productive mood of hers, out of the eagerness of her swirling memories. Later, as her ideas crystallized, the outline could be developed into a short novel. She would use the material which she knew best—herself. Thus, inevitably, she would set down a part of truth, a cross-section of life.

It seemed absurdly easy! She recalled a dozen successful novels, biographical in treatment. Most of the little events in the life of the hero or heroine were quite ordinary, the usual things that happened to anyone. Therein, indeed, lay their virtue. "Splendidly realistic," such accounts were called. The reader was pleased to recognize bits from his own experience.

Memories whirred in Vergie's brain. What a book she was going to make of them! The occurrences of her twenty-eight years lay scattered and meaningless, like the pieces of a puzzle; but they could be assembled into an artistic unity. Sometimes her life had seemed uneventful. But she realized that this had been a superficial view. The same number of things happened to everyone, of course. Her life

had been crowded with incident, now that she examined it closely.

Her story would begin when her heroine was a baby, for the thoughts and experiences of childhood were all-important; and already she beheld the possibility of a fat and indelicate section labeled "Adolescence." She unclasped her memories and ran their shining beads through her fingers. They were a part of living, of life . . . life that slips past. But she would catch at it and hold it. She would take life in her hands; print it, bind it. Thus she would detain and conquer it.

For a moment Vergie paused, with suspended pencil. She was swept by the exultant conviction that all the squandered years had been for this: that out of their confusion and insignificance she should form the story of a woman's soul. She began to write.

CHAPTER II

i

At first (so Vergie's penciled notes began) you were small and round, with parted black curls. After a bath you were dried in an uncomfortable position in mother's lap, your head hanging down so that you could barely see your pink kid shoes which were waiting for you on a table.

There was a dog, white and unembarrassed by pedigree, who liked looking out of the window and licking the ice cream plates after Sunday dinner. There was also a tall father. . . .

You were told that God was everywhere, and it was very hard to picture. He must be sprawled around the sky, resting on his elbow. Even so, that left gaps; inside his elbow, for instance. And if he was lying in the sky, how did he get all over the earth? Into this street? Into this house? Into everybody's house? Of course, his long white beard and flowing robes would help to cover up a good deal. But not enough.

ii

School brought new duties and obligations. You had to say a text out of the Bible each morning,

and everybody was sorry that there were no other texts as short as "Jesus wept."

It began in a big parlor, where the old furniture was dim in the light of late afternoon. Mother had taken you to see the lady who was the head of the school. She was not pretty at all, though she was smiling very much and saying that she wanted you to come to her school. You were flattered at being the center of so much attention.

"Her name is Vergie?" asked the old lady, a little as though she did not believe it. "I suppose that is short for Virginia? Virginia is one of my favorite names."

You felt it was embarrassing to have to explain that your name was just Vergie, and not one of the old lady's favorites, after all. But she seemed equally pleased when she understood.

"Vergie! How charming and unusual! Such a quaint little name for a little girl. . . ."

At the awkward moment of parting, you felt that something was required of you. You pointed hurriedly to a large picture over the desk.

"That," you said with authority, "is the Infant Samuel. God called to him in the night and he answered. I have that picture in my Children's Bible."

It had been a happy inspiration, for Mother looked delighted. "She can recite all the Bible

stories," she told the old lady, "word for word, as if she were reading them."

That night at supper Mother gave an account of the call to Father. "She said Vergie seemed a most unusually bright little girl. She could see that at once. And she thought her name was so quaint and just suited her. She never heard the name of 'Vergie' before."

Full of the placid contentment of bread and milk, you reflected that they were beginning to appreciate you.

iii

Your first day at school, you carried a shiny bag over your shoulder, though you had nothing to put in it but a pencil box, the top of which was made to look like a row of little books.

To your surprise, school was not held in the big, dim parlor, but in a series of bright, bare rooms, with desks in them and plants growing by the windows. You were given a desk for your own. The lid lifted so that you could put books and writing pads inside; on top there was a gutter for pencils and a hole with ink in it. The ink had a strong smell, not quite pleasant. Chalk, you discovered, was dusty and choking. But erasers were faintly pungent, and the odor of damp wood from a sucked pencil was delicious.

The proceedings seemed like Sunday School for

a while, but afterward there was your little desk; and a teacher induced you to copy some letters she had made on the blackboard. They had, unfortunately, very strict rules as to how you must sit while writing.

The whiskered lady looked into your room just once, smiling at you and the other children, all in one smile. She said nothing about how unusual your name was, and you were given no opportunity to tell the others about the Infant Samuel, as you had hoped you would be called upon to do.

It was good to get out into the sunshine and run home. Now that the first excitement was over you began to feel uncomfortable about your shiny bag. People would know where you had been. They would guess that this was your first day at school.

The lady next door was on her front porch. You tried to hurry by without looking, but she was too quick for you.

"Vergie," she called from behind the rubber plant, "how did you like your first day at school?"

"All right," you answered with a sickly smile. Everyone in the block must have heard her!

iv

With great care you laid your plans for that important occasion, your arrival in Heaven. As soon as you got in, you would look for Jesus. You

would run right up to Him, and throw your arms around His neck. Still, sometimes you grew afraid that, in the excitement of arrival, you might be diverted. Every night you rehearsed the scene, to impress it on your mind. Every night you prayed, "God, don't let me forget to kiss Jesus as soon as I get to Heaven."

When they put out the light and left you in bed—and other times, too, if you could get a little privacy—you talked to God. Sometimes you sent Him kisses, through the ceiling. The game was to throw a hundred kisses. If you lost count, you had to start over again.

You talked most to God when things went wrong, and you had been badly treated. One day a delivery boy left a rocking horse at your house by mistake. It was yellow with black spots and red nostrils, and all afternoon you swayed and jerked on its back. It seemed as if life could not go on unless you had a rocking horse of your own. But no one was interested. No one felt that you needed a rocking horse, and next morning the delivery boy came back and bore your horse away. You wept miserably and talked to God, because you thought He would understand about it. But, after all, God was very far away, and never called to you, though you often knelt in your crib and pretended to be the Infant Samuel.

v

Life turned into a rotation of school and vacation. School was a game of questions and answers. But they wouldn't let you answer all the questions. They wouldn't even answer all the questions you asked. Once a teacher told you, "Curiosity killed a cat." When you eagerly inquired How? the teacher and the big girls laughed

Arithmetic was the most puzzling of studies, and failed to hold your interest for long, in spite of the human problems it presented in the lives of day laborers and apple buyers. There was one nice feature about arithmetic, however. The answers to all the problems were in the back of the book.

vi

In the summer you went to the seashore to bathe and play in the sand. It was exciting to come home again. At first the house looked queer: the bare floors and big, curtainless windows, the tiled bathroom and your own enameled furniture. But soon it came to life again, and everything was as usual.

Fall was a wonderful time of year. You had a woolly coat and a red tam and scarf. In the late afternoons the streets were full of the smell of burning leaves. The old white houses were pretty in the early dusk as you roasted potatoes over a fire in the vacant lot on High Street.

In winter there was coasting and skating. On the long hill the sleds wore the road so smooth that horses had to go round the other way. There was a stretch of packed white, with a wicked gray streak of ice halfway down—that was where you began to go fast! But you liked even better to move rhythmically about the skating pond, as if music were playing.

Spring was perhaps the most beautiful time of all. There was no thrill like the thrill of taking off your winter underwear and stepping out with such a light, bare feeling into the softened air. You hurried to the little dark store where they sold the rubber balls on elastics; it was never quite spring until they came. "Not in yet," they would tell you every day for as much as a week, and then, at last—you saw them as soon as you came into the store, the pearl gray balls, lightly piled in a big pasteboard box. There, too, were the pink strings of elastic. You could scarcely control your impatience while the man selected your ball and elastic, knotted the end of the latter, and inserted it into the ball with the aid of a pin.

vii

In the evenings, when Mother was out, Mary ascended from the kitchen to sit with you. Mary's husband had died, and she had five children in the Home, but her cares seemed to rest lightly upon

her. She was anxious to improve herself, and you helped her with her past participles, which were conspicuously bad.

The evenings were very full, for, in addition to Mary's grammar and your lessons, you were working on a novel, a love story of Revolutionary times. The girls all thought it was splendid. In a way, you felt that your novel compensated for the unusualness of having a little sister. It had been, to say the least, irregular. When they led you into the spare room and showed you the screw of red-brown face in the crib, you were unimpressed. You stood for a moment, looking down on it, because it seemed to be expected of you.

An aunt was whispering to Father, "Ten years between them! Isn't it really wonderful?"

"Isn't it lovely, Vergie, the doctor brought you a little sister?"

viii

The first time you went to the theater, you saw "The Wizard of Oz." It was an exciting experience. The Hillsdale Opera House had red plush seats and there were pale young men who showed people where to sit. The big curtain on the stage displayed a colored scene of a garden party, with gentlemen in white wigs and ladies in ruffled dresses; around the edge ran a border containing squares of information about chewing gum, bakeries, tailors and laundries.

Marvelous beyond your imaginings was the play itself. But then, up to this time, you had attended only a lecture on the life of George Washington, with stereopticon views, at the Methodist Church; and a program of musical numbers which included your favorite "Farewell, my Bluebell."

As you grew older, you were allowed to go with the other girls to the matinées of visiting stock companies. The most important week was when Burke Barclay came. You all liked him best. During the week of Burke Barclay's stay, you made excuses to go into the Schuyler House at dinner time. Peeping into the dining room, you nudged the other girls and whispered: "There he is. At the table by the window. Oh, come on, he'll see you looking."

ix

Clothes were nice to have, but really more trouble than they were worth. It was bad enough to have to hunt through stores for them, but worse still was having them made. The fittings took place in Miss Beatty's front parlor, which had a folding bed in it. There was a set of books on "Diseases of the Human Body," but you were seldom allowed to look at the pictures. All around the room hung limp dresses in various stages of completion, feebly suggesting the personalities they were one day to take on.

Miss Beatty wore a black sateen apron with pockets, and a tape measure and a large cushion

full of pins was suspended from her waist. There was a faint dressmaker's smell about her, and her fingers had dressmaker's nails, little and thin and fluted. You stood for an endless time while Miss Beatty pinned things on you. (When she was tired or out of sorts, she stuck the pins into you.) At the conclusion of the fitting, half of the pins were found to be run through your underwear. You moved restlessly from foot to foot, while Miss Beatty deliberately removed and reinserted the pins. You were not allowed to help, because you might not get them back in the right place. They were all out. No, it had caught again in the back. . . .

"Don't be so impatient, Vergie," Mother said. "You have all the rest of the day to play. You ought to be glad to have such a pretty new dress."

x

You went to two Sunday Schools, one right after church and another in the afternoon. Mrs. Hasterby taught the class which came in the afternoon, and one Sunday she was away because her father was ill. The next Sunday she was away because he had died.

You wished another Sunday would never come, so that you would not have to be in contact with the bereaved Mrs. Hasterby. She would be dressed in black, and they would make some awful mistake in choosing the hymns. They might even sing the

one with "orphans no longer fatherless" in it; or, more dreadful still, "My Father Will Be Waiting When I Get Home."

But when you reached Sunday School, purposely a little late, they were singing "Yield Not To Temptation," as safe a hymn as could have been selected. You squeezed into a chair remote from Mrs. Hasterby, who turned to smile faintly at you. She looked white and tired in her black dress, but the crisis of greeting her had passed with marvelous ease. She, too, must feel relieved to have it over.

The superintendent prayed for an endless time. You chilled when he touched on "if there are any among us who have heavy hearts this day, O Lord, wilt Thou be very near unto them."

When the prayer was ended the class moved their chairs to form a circle. In this process you were somehow forced into a position directly in front of Mrs. Hasterby. Frightened by this proximity to grief, you wriggled your feet tightly around the legs of the chair, and pressed one hand over your face. These physical adjustments seemed to fortify you against any onslaught of emotion.

"I think you girls have all heard," Mrs. Hasterby began, slowly drawing off her black cotton gloves, "that a great personal grief has come to me in the loss of my dear father. It has been a heavy cross to bear. I never could have endured it at all without God's help. In the last days of my father's

illness, when he was in terrible suffering, I carried all my burden of sorrow to the Saviour, and He gave me strength. Oh, girls, He is the only one who can! It is God's will that this sorrow should come to me. It is God's will that sorrow should come to every one of you girls. I wish I could make you know what it will mean to you to have God's help at such a time."

When Mrs. Hasterby at last stopped speaking, you came out of a clammy stupor. You had seen the tears coming into her eyes. They overflowed into the brown circled places underneath, but she made no attempt to wipe them away. Her lips and chin were trembling. Oh, it was horrible! It made your own eyes fill with hot tears. You twined your legs desperately about the chair, you drove your finger nails into your burning cheek. How could anyone expose her feelings, naked and painful, to your gaze?

When the Temperance Lesson was over, they sang "My Jesus, As Thou Wilt." Your palsied legs would scarcely support you as you staggered into the aisle, between the long rows of golden oak chairs, past the purple and red stained-glass windows, and into the cooling air of the street.

xi

Lilian and Katherine and Maida were your best friends. While you made no difference at all in your feeling for them, you secretly hoped that every

one of them liked you better than the others. When you spent the night together, you lay cuddled close in bed, asking each other searching and intimate questions. It was called "playing Truth," and about twelve o'clock at night was the best time to play.

You had been together so much since you were small children that you made nothing of undressing in front of one another, or even of taking your baths together. Something in your Puritan training made you find a necessity for defending this. People who were self-conscious about taking off their clothes, you said, had wrong thoughts in their minds.

One day in the spring you all drove out to the country to picnic. You found a good place to leave the horse and cart, and carried your lunch to a little grove of birches beside a stream. The afternoon sun was so warm that you thought of going in wading. And when your shoes and stockings were off, you suddenly unbuttoned your dress. The other girls, too, slipped out of their clothes—you were all set free, in an instant. You ran and leapt in the bright spring air, you plunged in the cold stream, and lay stretched out in the sun. While you played, you watched the other girls with pleasure; and you thought how like the budding birch trees were their straight young bodies. Just by dropping their clothes they had made themselves a part of the sun-filled place. They were not Lilian and Kay and Maida any more, but three girls out of the stories

of Ancient Greece. You thought you would like to see how you looked and, leaning over the water, you played at being Narcissus.

Lilian and Kay began playing they were Daphne and Apollo. But Maida started to put on her clothes, and presently you were all school girls again. You remembered that you were, after all, school girls on a picnic. Lilian's gingham suspender dress, Maida's stubby brown shoes, Kay's guimpe with the torn place on the shoulder . . . where were the nymphs of a moment ago?

Driving home, you laughed and squeezed one another's hands. It had been the most perfect afternoon. It was a secret which belonged to just you four. "W.N." were the initials of the secret. They stood for "Wood Nymphs." When you said "W.N." and looked at one another, everybody would be dying to know what you meant.

xii

One evening you heard Mother talking to Father. "I met Mrs. Adams downtown today," she said. "She was speaking about Vergie—how pretty she is getting to be. Someone saw her over at the Schuyler House, and said she had a profile like a cameo."

Like a cameo! That was like that old pin of Grandma's. It wasn't pretty, but the comparison seemed flattering. You gazed thoughtfully at your reflection in the glass, considering the effect of

your clothes, which you had hitherto regarded largely as matters of convenience. New ones lent variety, old ones grew shabby and tiresome. But it seemed there was more to it than that and you learned to observe how your clothes combined with your hair and eyes. Soon you found a long mirror in which you could see your whole slim figure.

That year you insisted on corsets and silk stockings. You embroidered underwear for yourself, with scallops and wreaths of flowers; and the visits to Miss Beatty grew important, for you had ideas of your own now. The dresses must all be fitted in very tightly about the waist. When there were collars, they must be high and stiffly boned.

Secretly, in your bedroom, you took tucks in your corsets. You pulled in the strings, so that your waist ached, breathing was difficult, and your legs seemed far away. You pinched your cheeks into an inflamed pinkness and put talcum powder on your nose and neck.

These activities bore a mysterious relation to your growing interest in boys. There had always been boys, of course; some rough, some horrid, some rather nice. You had played tennis with them, and danced with them at dancing school. On spring evenings the boys and girls had played Sixty-O under the old trees in the darkening streets.

It was hard to explain the change. Still in the warm evenings the boys and girls gathered, but

you were too big for Sixty-O. Someone played a mandolin, and you all sang. You went to the drug-store for ice-cream sodas; you danced and played charades. You talked about friendship.

Personally, you found that talking about friendship introduced just the right serious note into your relations with boys. You would lend one of the nicer ones Hugh Black's "Friendship," first marking the more poignant passages. Then you would suggest you would like to be friends with him—in the true sense of the word. It meant, of course, that you would always have to be sincere with each other. That was one of the points of a really fine friendship; it could stand hearing the truth.

You and Lilian and Kay and Maida were unanimous on one thing: it was a terrible mistake to spoon with a boy. Some girls might achieve a kind of popularity by such conduct but they lost the boys' respect. The way boys talked about that kind of girl was dreadful.

xiii

The summer you were fifteen, you had a revelation which was overwhelming. In its light you strove to read the meaning of some latent force in people's words and acts. You felt comprehension was necessary to admittance to the strange fraternity of adults, beings no longer harried by uncertainties.

You were spending that summer in the mountains

with Mother and Pet, and you found it very gay, because there were so many boys at the hotel. Some of them were older boys—seniors at college. They always thought you were older, until they found out. Once a boy thought you were twenty-one. His name was Paul, and on a certain night he brought you home from a dance which had been given in a cottage up on the hill.

Down the winding pathway you came walking together, you and Paul. The lights in most of the cottages were out, and the stars were dim and far away. The chirp of the crickets was the only sound, except for a strange noise which Paul was making as he breathed. He did not touch you, did not even take your arm to help you over the rough places, but all around you his presence was beating.

As you stepped on the darkened porch of the hotel, you were dizzy with a sort of longing and a sort of fear. You did not seem able to turn casually and say good-night. Then Paul suddenly caught your hand, held it in his for a second and pressed it against his lips.

He left you quickly, but a tumult sang in your veins, and you felt how your knees were shaking and your temples throbbing with this new excitement. Magically you moved upstairs to the room where Mother and Pet lay asleep. You undressed softly, your fingers shaking over the buttons and pins.

For a moment you knelt down by your bed, but the only prayers you offered to God were the fluttering wings of your heart. In the darkness, you lay wide-eyed, re-living that moment when Paul kissed your hand; and you marveled the others did not awaken, so turbulent was the tremor in your body, so loud the singing in your blood.

xiv

With a slightly exaggerated dignity you stepped from the rickety trolley and surveyed the college. There were the wide lawns, the ivy-hung buildings. You had hardly counted on its being so large; and your throat tightened as you saw a white-clad girl advancing toward you with manifestly official geniality.

"Won't you come with me?" said the girl. "Do let me help you with your bags. Isn't it a lovely day? I'm so glad it isn't 'freshman weather.' We call it 'freshman weather' when it rains, you know."

She wasn't doing awfully well and your poise was restored. Confidence returned to you, as you went slowly through the formalities of entrance in the lofty old rooms where neat, kindly women greeted you with impersonal calm. Conscious that you were becomingly dressed in a blue linen suit and small blue sailor hat, you were cordial, though rather distant, with the omnipresent white-clad girls of the Reception Committee.

You ate your first college dinner in a big, bare room where the clatter of dishes could scarcely be heard above the clatter of talk. It was an uncomfortable meal, and you were glad to go to chapel, with the evening light glowing under the stone arches of the cloisters. Later, in the darkness, you walked across the campus. It was sweetly odorous, and in the big buildings shone square after square of yellow light. You felt the glamor of it, as if it had been a scene on the stage, and there was a feeling of community in it, too. In all these hundreds of rooms were other girls. Many of them were to be your friends. For four years you would work and play together.

And there was something yet more important, for you were driven by an old desire, the desire for knowing. You thought that all your life you had been asking questions, and still there were thousands more, crying to be answered. You felt like an explorer, tremulous and eager on the doorstep of a new world.

In your greedy little girlhood you had once planned to read all the books that had ever been written—not almost all, that wouldn't do! You had the same feeling still. Understanding, you felt, must be yours. Half truths would not satisfy you. You wanted the whole—everything, whether or not it squared with your dreams; all the answers in the back of the book of problems. You knew that you

were no longer a child, but a woman with a woman's brain which had imperious needs and desires and ambitions. . . .

You thought it best to say nothing about your woman's brain to the other girls. You agreed with them that the light green kalsomine in your rooms was perfectly awful.

xv

You took stock of your neighbors. On one side were two sophomores, long, rangy girls made for hockey sticks and basket balls and tennis rackets. Even when dressed for classes or for dinner, they seemed always about to drop a skirt and reveal themselves bloomered for the gym. On the other side was a scrawny freshman with a marvelous coiffure. She had photographs of fourteen fine upstanding young men on her bureau. And, of course, she was homesick! You wondered cynically how many of the fourteen were responsible for impairing her morale.

The only junior on your corridor belonged to the type you were soon to know as a "grind." She looked as though she had come out of a Rogers group which had been kept for a long time in a dusty room. Every morning you met her going to wash with all her clothes on. Every morning you complained about it to anyone who would listen. "Do you suppose she ever takes a bath? I never

heard of washing in a collar. I think it's disgusting."

The sophomores who roomed across the hall were something entirely new in your experience. They were pretty, untidy girls, and they and their friends seemed to have resolved to turn the years backward, and become as little children again. They had two dolls and a Teddy bear, and these formed the center of much of their conversation. They were called Icelandic Clamhound and Boo and Cardinal Newman. The names were supposed to be very funny.

They embarrassed you, because with the best will in the world you could not laugh as much as they did at their jokes. When their friends came in, it was still more terrible. They all sat on trunks and packing cases, and talked in their silly way, and laughed and laughed. They were always reminding one another of the time they were locked in the chapel or spent the night on the library roof, or made their way from dormitory to dormitory through the heating system. You could see that they felt that the college belonged in an intimate way entirely to them, because they appreciated its points more than anyone else did. Even as freshmen, you knew that they had never been uncertain or hesitant at all, but had come boldly prancing in and claimed it as their own.

One of them had a guinea pig named Rudolph.

It lived in their rooms. You did not often see it, but you felt its presence whenever you went in. They never worried about it, because it always turned up—in a bed or a bureau drawer or somewhere.

In their strange way, they were very kind. They gave you hot chocolate, and invited you to a Roman banquet. You were all to wear sheets, they explained.

xvi

With trepidation and curiosity you attended your first classes.

"Most of the Faculty are awfully nice," the sophomores across the hall had told you. "Of course, some of them are sarcastic. But there is only one you must be sure not to get. Miss Huggins, in the math department. My dear, she is awful!"

"What does she do?" you asked.

"She throws chalk at you," said a sophomore in the tense tones of one alluding to the tortures of the Inquisition. "Everyone is terrified of her. It's dreadful. My roommate had her last year. She was really sick after every class."

When, in accordance with your schedule, you entered Room 203, Russell Hall, at 8:30 on the first Monday morning, you were more resigned than amazed at finding Miss Huggins in charge. Of

course, it would be so. Life was like that. Sick after every class! Well, you would have to live through it.

Miss Huggins was a thin old lady, with sharp eyes and a nervous, perfunctory smile. She opened proceedings ably and irritably. Your eyes wandered surreptitiously to the blackboards, where the white fingers of chalk lay in rows, a plentiful supply, all whole and unbroken—ready for the first class of the year.

"And will you oblige the class by repeating Axiom II—*Miss Stilson!*" Your name sounded out like a shot.

Axiom II. . . . Axiom II. . . .

"Things equal to the same . . . ?" No, that was wrong. You saw it at once by the way her lips tightened in disgust. She turned to another girl. Too frightened to answer, that girl was. Ah, she could answer, the silly one with ruffles. You could have answered, too, by now. Anyone could answer, once she had time to think.

Miss Huggins drew a deep, exaggerated breath of relief. She went to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. For a moment she held it, rolling it in her shaking old hands. You lived through years. Then she turned and drew a circle on the board.

"Young ladies," she said, "up to this time you

have presumably considered only those figures whose points and lines lie in the same plane. . . ."

At last, the gong sounded; the class was over. You left the room, relieved, but with a sense of strain. You had encountered the higher education.

xvii

Spurred on by the athletic sophomores, you made the freshman hockey team. You loved the excitement of the games in the sharp fall afternoons. Through the twilight coolness, you ran back to your hall, rejoicing in the freedom of bloomers. After one of the games, the whole freshman team picnicked together, high on a hill. The deep peace which descended upon you was a part of the warmth of the big fire and your heavy sweater; of the bacon and coffee; of the keen smell of cold and the pines; the first white stars, the pleasant lassitude, the sense of comradeship. Perhaps it was for these things, after all, that people came to college.

xviii

Hot chocolate was the beverage which stimulated you to hours of excited discussion. You had discovered that there were many things wrong in the world, and you were eager to track down solutions. These solutions must be fundamental. Palliative things, like charity, for example, were all wrong.

Unintelligent people, who did not think and who had not gone to college, believed in charity.

xix

By sophomore year, terms caught from books and classrooms began to flavor your speech. You called people "mediæval" and "bourgeois" and "Philistine" and "Puritanical." These words had an amazingly conclusive power in an argument. An occasional reference to "the herd" or to "mob instinct" stood you in good stead, too.

You began to theorize with some authority on the subject of sex. In more sentimental moments, the discussion turned on the sex problem as it was related to your own lives. Most of you felt that it was best to wait until you were twenty-five before getting married. It seemed rather an advanced age, but it allowed time for seeing something of the world—taking a job for a while, before settling down to the responsibilities of matrimony. Somewhere in the world was the right man for you to marry and, when he came along, the happiest part of your life would begin. Meantime, all your acts and thoughts must be directed to the end of keeping yourself fine for him and for the children you would have. Your faces wore a look of tremulous, half-concealed sweetness as you talked about these things; about the one right man and marriage and a home and ideals and children.

xx

Senior year you roomed with your two best friends, Harriet and Leigh. Harriet was specializing in economics and sociology, and after college she was going to study labor conditions in her father's factory. She had a collection of books on socialism which filled three shelves of the widest bookcase. Almost any afternoon you would find Harriet, poised, academic and handsome, in conference with a group of shabby intellectuals. These groups had much to say about how unspoiled Harriet was by her money and position, and how awfully big it was of her to take an enlightened view of labor problems. References to Harriet's money, which Harriet never mentioned, seemed to you stupid and vulgar. Besides, considered in relation to her enlightened views, Harriet's money aroused you to irony.

Leigh, the daughter of a Boston minister, had an elfin face with a child's eyes and smile. She could say the most sophisticated things, and she spent hours alone, writing unrhymed verse. Leigh was a deep one. You were terribly afraid of giving yourself away to her, laying yourself open to her scorn, by exposing some poor rag of ignorance or sentimentality. You saved up the choice bits of your mind to show to her, bringing them out quite casu-

ally, as though the ideas had just occurred to you.

Leigh's clothes had no style, and you felt they would have been nearly as bad if she had had any money to spend on them. She parted her hair in the middle and drew it straight down over her ears. The loose knot in the back was always coming down. Leigh had never had a corset or a beau or a motive of self-interest.

xxi

With solidarity you scorned the vulgarity of the popular attitude toward sex. You were opposed to secretiveness and sentimentality in the consideration of natural functions. They had to be performed. Everyone knew about them. No one was taken in by the farce of denying their existence. Well, then. . . .

To individuals of sufficient mental standing you explained the importance of speaking frankly about physical facts. "Don't be afraid to face them" was the keynote of your message. There was more, too, about the advantages of "the clean speech of science" as compared with "the pseudo-religious evasions and little boys' nastinesses" of the past.

You were all enormously interested in eugenics. People bred horses and cattle, but when it came to human beings, blind chance was good enough. Was there any logic to that? There was a crying

need for State laws, restricting the privilege of marriage to the physically fit. (You had some private qualms as to the subsequent conduct of the unfit, denied the boon of marriage.) Anyway, each of you would do what you could in a small way by demanding from your future fiancé a health certificate before you married. You would indeed produce a health certificate yourself; not that there would be anything wrong with you, but it would be only fair, and as an intellectual you must set an example.

There were other laws which had to be enacted. Leigh's hobby was mothers' pensions. Harriet was the specialist on factory legislation. While they talked, the future blossomed in a radiant vision of equity. You listened respectfully, dominated by them. They knew so much and they cared so terribly. You were afraid to let them know how dull and hopeless it seemed to you, after the spell of their enthusiasm had passed. Dutifully you wrote letters to your representative in the State Assembly. The most critical comment on which you ever ventured was: "Aren't the results you are looking for rather Utopian?" They quickly showed you they were not.

xxii

Your religion, which you had thought an essential part of you, suddenly disappeared. You were, in an objective way, rather disturbed by the

quiet completeness of its departure. It seemed so superficial not to care at all, not to miss its consolations. People usually wept and wrung their hands and said bitter things about having lost God. A friend who was active in the Christian Association advised you to seek refuge in prayer. It was her idea that if you threw yourself on God's mercy He would not fail to restore your faith. But you didn't want your faith. You were getting on splendidly without it.

Something had unfolded in your mind when you read that Emerson denied personality to God, "because it was too little, not too much." There came other unfoldings: "The Age of Reason," "The Golden Bough," Renan's "Life of Jesus"; phrases—Herbert Spencer's "impiety of the pious," Montaigne's *"Que sçais-je?"*, shafts of satire from G. B. S. Satire destroyed your last wavering loyalty to the teachings of your childhood. You learned doubt as some people learn good manners—by avoiding what others ridicule.

The shackles were off and you were free. How glorious it was to discard prejudices! Weak people could not stand the truth. It was meat for the strong. You defined religion to your own satisfaction: "Religion is man's compromise with the forces of a hostile environment." Few indeed were those who had the courage not to compromise.

When people were unreceptive, you never intruded your religious views on them. Perhaps they were weak, and would be helpless without the support of their illusions. But, oh, the assured idiocy of their patter! They never scrupled about forcing it on you. They were so smug. It was irritating, but there was a pitiful side to it. You never passed a church without being saddened by the human needs and aspirations which its existence symbolized.

xxiii

Walt Whitman said: "It is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary." That was a white light burning in your mind. (Could it be one of the answers in the back of the book of problems?) Something grew clear as you considered the idea, and saw it illumine history, biology, evolution, philosophy. Humanity trooping down the ages in a gigantic pageant of disillusionment! That was what you saw. But the actors, for the most part unaware of what the pageant represented, of what their parts signified, were too involved, too much occupied by the drama to try to comprehend it.

How splendid this vision was! It was disillusionment, but it brought no pain. It brought a singing

triumph, because it was magnificent, because you could understand.

xxiv

Christmas vacation was unsettling. Through Harriet you had come to know two boys who were studying law, Brace Andrews and Roger Vane. As soon as you saw Roger Vane, you realized that he was the most attractive man you had ever met. In the first place, he did not seem young at all. He was scornful and bitter; terribly cynical, you told yourself with delight. Like Leigh, he forced you to keep for him your most sophisticated flashes of thought. You wanted his approval. And you liked his thin face, with the long narrow nose which gave his profile a Semitic look. His eyes, discontented and profound, observed everything.

You and Roger grew to know each other well during Christmas vacation. You were proud to have him as your escort to parties and the theater; and you bore up well under his stream of acrimonious comment. He seldom said anything complimentary to you. But one night at a dance, he told you that you had passionate hands. You had never been so thrilled. With new interest you looked at your thin, creamy fingers. You had no idea how passionate hands were different from any others, but you felt sure that not many of the girls at college had them.

xxv

You were young and pretty and gay. It seemed to you all-important to be so, and you dreamt of Christmas vacation for weeks after your return to college. Then Roger came for the Senior Prom, a fertile spot in a waste of study. College seemed gray afterward. The walks were full of slush, the halls were drafty. You were tired of the bleak classrooms, the carelessly dressed girls, the clatter at mealtimes. You had moments of suffocation in this community of women.

This was a mood, and it would pass. If only spring would come: spring, with its happiness that was nine parts pain, the year's adolescence, full of disquietudes. You would let Roger come for a week-end. Together you would walk, perhaps hand in hand, over the hills, among the blossoming fruit trees of the virgin year.

xxvi

There were a dozen girls around the long oak table, high up in the Gothic tower room where the seminar history class was held. Dr. Eliot was reading aloud, out of a rare old book about Erasmus. As you listened, you looked at the yellow pages, quaintly printed, and the worn edges of the brown calfskin binding.

It was a sunny day of spring. In the glass which

covered the end of the table, you could see reflected the pointed window, which framed blue sky and clouds and treetops. The yellow pages of the old book rested on them. And something was moving in the glass! You leaned forward to see. It was the tiny reflection of a swallow, soaring up into the sky.

The symbol of learning—the soaring swallow mirrored in the classroom table! Your spirit lifted in an ecstasy like prayer.

xxvii

As Commencement drew near, you were filled with regret. The four best years of your life—ended! It was hard to grow older and see things change and pass.

With Harriet and Leigh, you strolled about the campus in the last warm evenings, recalling poignantly the incidents of your college years. The checkered lights of the buildings reminded you of your first glimpse of the campus at night. How far away that Vergie seemed, a slim child in a blue sailor hat! There was something pitiful in her hopefulness. Her confidence in the future had not been betrayed; nothing so false, so bad as that. But reality had fallen short. Its colors were not so bright as those of her vision. Were these four years, you wondered, a symbol of all living, all endeavor and attainment? Must there always be a

hot needle of irony in achievement? Pricking regrets in the very elation of success? . . .

Blond moths under the moon, these other girls you passed. Someone was playing a mandolin softly. Someone laughed from a window among the vines. On the old steps a group was singing. A noisy crowd came whooping down the hill, breaking the spell with cries and laughter and the smell of bacon.

You were to leave all this: so many traditions, so many hopes; much of beauty and comradeship. You grudged them angrily to the ones who were to come after you. Silently, offensively, they would take your place. In a horrid way, their experience would duplicate yours. They would think the same thoughts, suffer the same regrets.

Almost as objectionable were those who had preceded you: these interlopers, the alumnæ, gleeful and possessive, absorbed in their business of reunion. They were outsiders. They were old women, acting unbecomingly; fat ones, dancing around trees. That big and hoydenish group had been out of college for five years—haggard, faded women, trying to call back youth.

xxviii

The packing cases were in the halls, and it was almost time to go. Families, bewildered and per-

spiring, were everywhere in the sunshine. There were bunches of girls, like sweetpeas, in organdies and chiffons. That was Class Day.

Commencement Day brought solemnity in cap and gown. Some of the girls dropped tears into their packing cases, but your sentimental moment had passed. You were detached and cynical. And somewhere in you was a vast impatience to be off on a new voyage of exploration. You had dreamt of undiscovered countries, but they weren't to be found in study. It was time to end this childish period of preparation, it was time to throw down a challenge to life. No half truths would satisfy you. You must have all the answers in the back of the book. You were resolved to go forth and conquer without further delay.

CHAPTER III

i

LAST evening she had walked through the park in the gently powdering snow, Vergie remembered. Yet it seemed long ago, and it had been strange to awaken to a world masked in white. As she moved across Fifth Avenue on her way to the office where she worked, she reflected that the cleared, wet sidewalks gave no hint of the country purity of snow which she had observed uptown. There, this morning, the drifts still lay dead-white, under the dull sun which stared from behind a pallid sky. Vergie had trudged along a narrow, squeaking track, save where last night's wind had swept the snow aside in swirled, fantastic traceries. At the blown crossing, the floury furrows had slid and collapsed as she strove to find security in the footprints of earlier passers.

Downtown the streets were already leveled and slushy, except for the mounds of spoiled white along the curbing. Beside these high mounds moved the hurrying current of workers. They seemed brighter and swifter than usual. And Vergie thought that in her novel she would describe a scene in New

York on a winter morning after snow; picturing the passersby as she saw them now, sharp and significant against the light screen.

She rejoiced to find her mental processes keen and alert this morning. The long lobby of the office building into which she turned was an ugly vista. It was lined with a mottled green marble which gave the effect of Roquefort cheese—with dark figures moving through it like maggots. But that last touch, Vergie admitted, was rather sordid. It wouldn't do for her book. Such realism was tiresome, old European stuff. She looked at her watch. The hour was ridiculously early. Mr. Twill never came to the office until half-past ten. She stepped into the lunch room which opened on the lobby of the building and, mounting a high stool at the counter, ordered a cup of coffee.

From the vantage of her perch, Vergie surveyed the streaming office workers through the large glass windows of the lunch room. It was, she reflected, apparent that it was Saturday morning. There was an air of subdued holiday—in fact, of half-holiday—exuberance in their faces and bearing. This day, it might be read, would see no long enslavement, but an early release. Even as they entered, their young wings were spread for flight. The girls were most conspicuous. They wore their newest finery, smart dresses, short fur coats, gay millinery. They hurried through the lobby in chattering groups, their

faces red and white, bright hair flaring under mad hats. Some of them were crude, almost all were obvious. But any one would have made a poster. Vergie looked at them comprehendingly from her perch in the lunch room; and her being was suffused with a lively sympathy, not untinctured with arrogance.

ii

The offices of *Good Taste,* a monthly periodical devoted to the beautification of the home, were situated on the fifteenth story. From the windows might be seen blocks of less lofty buildings, a wreckage of cluttered roofs, stuck with the casual spars of skyscrapers. Vergie walked into an office in the editorial department, where she worked. The winter light fell thinly on the plastered walls, adorned with framed magazine covers. It fell, too, on Miss Aronson, the stenographer, plying her morning lipstick by the window.

"Good morning," said Vergie affably, and she smiled her quick smile at Miss Aronson, whom she liked. It pleased her to recognize the comradeship of labor. She had a moment of elation over arriving, over beginning a new day, fresh and unspoiled. But the papers on her desk recalled a familiar distaste for the routine of her work.

In addition to her editorial duties, Vergie acted as secretary to Mr. Twill, the editor of *Good Taste.*

She went into the inner office, his sanctum, to make sure that all things were in readiness for his coming. She pulled open the wide top-drawer of his desk, in which was arranged every accessory which Mr. Twill might need. There were pins and rubber bands and fasteners and erasers in their respective compartments; blotters in a white, rectangular pile; a row of sharpened pencils, their points turned to the left, so that the right hand picked them up with the minimum of inconvenience; a glass cylinder of water with a sponge on the end for moistening the flaps of envelopes—these were only a few of the appointments of the drawer.

Mr. Twill did not often have occasion to use these things. In a practical way, it would have made no difference if they had not been arranged with such meticulous order. Mr. Twill's day was not, indeed, so crowded that it would have mattered if he had had to search for a moment on the rare occasions when he affixed a fastener or sealed a letter for himself; nor would much efficiency have been lost if he had had to turn his wrist in order to pick up a pencil.

It was, nevertheless, in the name of efficiency that the drawer was so disposed. His top-drawer pleased Mr. Twill by reminding him what a good business man he was. He thought he had planned it himself, and Vergie let him think so. It was her joke

on Mr. Twill. Usually she was amused by the drawer, which seemed to her to bear an absurd resemblance to a box of assorted candy mints. But, making sure this morning that its perfection was unimpaired, Vergie regarded it with disgust. The joke, it appeared, was on her. The drawer symbolized the tyranny of routine, of preoccupations unworthy her talents. She closed it sharply, and grudgingly completed her inspection of the sanctum. She placed the waste basket at the point most convenient to Mr. Twill's left hand, the hand he threw things away with. She turned the page of the desk calendar, so that the Twill eye should not be affronted by seeing the date of the day before.

By this time, the various departments of *Good Taste* were busily at work. The dulled murmur of their activities came to Vergie's ears, as she returned to her desk in the outer office. The room next door was shared by an elderly female decorator and a young art editor. The Information and Shopping services were housed in the office beyond. Down the hall was the Advertising Department; and the circulation of the magazine was regulated in stencil-scattered galleries on the floor below.

Vergie took up a lay-out of photographs, headed "Sunrooms of Distinction," and began writing captions for them. But her mind strayed from the sunrooms. She couldn't concentrate on work this morn-

ing, because she was thinking of herself, of her future. Of what significance was this day's routine, this brief phase of life? Through the window beside her desk, she could see the broken lines of roofs and, in the gray channel of street far below, scampering toy figures and black checkers of traffic. But actually quite a different picture was before her eyes. She was seeing a lovely lady, slender and erect, in a dim room filled with flowers. Men bent to kiss her hand and pay her homage . . . "an author of brilliant subtlety." There was the true Vergie, a far more vivid reality than this girl in a black dress who sat working at an office desk.

Punctually at ten-thirty Mr. Twill strode into the office and entered his sanctum. Almost at once his buzzer gave its soft, but imperious purr.

Mr. Twill was the kind of magazine editor who affords a hearty laugh to the members of the advertising department. He inspired that department of *Good Taste* to facetious remarks about the big open spaces where men are men. Mr. Twill did not seem a product of the big open spaces, but he suited very nicely the blue console tables of his sanctum. Vergie had once been attracted by his waxy smoothness; by his small head, his elegant finger nails, and his vertical stripe of dark red mustache, placed directly under his nostrils, like a nosebleed. But the illusion had worn thin. Now, after three years, she

was bored with Mr. Twill. She was tired of his niceties and his archness. She couldn't forgive him the affectation with which he pronounced French and Italian words, or his trick of rubbing cigarette smoke out of his eye with the back of his thumb, the corners of his mouth drawn down.

iii

Mr. Twill's head was aching this morning, and he had lowered the shades, so that no light should fall on the speckless waste of glass which covered his desk. He was pressing the thumb and fingers of one hand against his brow with a gesture of pain.

"Vergie, my nerves . . . they're ragged this morning." He modified his gesture into a stroking of the brow with his fingers. "If only I could go away with you somewhere, just the two of us, to some quiet place. . . ."

Vergie waited with patience. She understood quite well that this was simply an agreeable prelude. The business of the day would soon begin.

"My dear girl," continued Mr. Twill, "something has to be done about the April number. It's dreadfully flat. We'll have to find some really smart interiors—not just interiors for the sake of interiors. . . ."

"Say that word 'interiors' again, and I leave this office," Vergie registered irritably in her mind. But

her small triangle of face remained serenely attentive.

". . . something wonderfully smart," Mr. Twill went on. "How about running that first article on French furniture? Bayard's coming in this morning with his photographs. Sit in with us, Vergie. I'm not good for much today. You sit in with us. . . ." His tones trailed away, tired of the effort of dragging the words. But, when Vergie went back to the outer office, he followed her, and stood balancing limply beside her desk, his elegant hands in his pockets.

"Not bad my getting those articles from Bayard?" he appealed to her. "Not bad, eh? Big name as a connoisseur. I was at the Beaux Arts with him, he remembered me at once. He's one of *the* Bayards, you know," Mr. Twill added significantly. His sense of the value of the connection animated his sagging oval of face. As he reentered his office, he looked back over his shoulder. "If only we could change the name of the magazine. . . ." Mr. Twill sighed, shrugged his shoulders after the manner of the French, and closed the door of his sanctum behind him.

The heading, *Good Taste,* was a survival of pre-Twill days when the magazine's pages showed bungalow plans, convenient kitchen arrangements, and the living rooms of Middle Western millionaires. Since assuming the post of editor, Mr. Twill had done his

best to remove the stigma of the past. And his insistence on the purely smart had triumphed over the dismal headshakings of the advertising and circulation departments. Smartness must have a market, they were forced to admit. But his attempts at changing the name of the magazine met with their firm opposition. He was obliged to suffer the monthly degradation of seeing all his smartness gathered under the heading of *Good Taste*.

iv

Vergie rose from her desk, as a boy conducted Mr. Bayard into the office. He was a vague, quiet man, in a greatcoat of foreign cut. He greeted Vergie with courtesy, apparently relieved at seeing her familiar face.

"Rather an old French piece himself," Vergie thought, rolling her eyes at Miss Aronson, as Mr. Bayard went into the sanctum. "Genuine, but in need of repairs." Yet she felt that the roll of the eyes had been a trifle disloyal to her caste. Literary folk ought to stand together. And no one had a right to roll her eyes at Louis Bayard's cadenced prose.

"I suppose books about furniture don't bring in much," she said to Miss Aronson. "It isn't fair to make fun of him. . . ."

"No?" said Miss Aronson, polite but unimpressed. "Did you get the pre-war clothes?" she inquired.

Vergie delayed for a moment at her desk, adding a word or a comma, telling herself that it was inconvenient to be interrupted. But she was actually most relieved to escape from the sunrooms, whose latticed and cretonned reproductions looked up expectantly from their page. She went into Mr. Twill's sanctum and seated herself at the wide desk, across from the two men. They were bending over a mass of shiny photographs of French furniture. Louis Bayard had thrown aside his greatcoat, revealing himself surprisingly lean. His eyes were brown, and so were his thinning hair and his small mustache; he wore a brown bow tie, and a shirt with stripings of brown. He was adjusting on his nose a pair of glasses on a black cord; and he smiled at Vergie with his quizzical frown, one eyebrow drawn up higher than the other. His hands began to fuss among the photographs.

The two men were in sharp contrast. Louis Bayard appeared preoccupied and negligent, Mr. Twill dapper and ingratiating. Beside Louis Bayard, this editor seemed to fill his clothes too importantly. There was an almost vulgar self-consciousness in his attire. A triangle of monogrammed white protruded too deliberately from his breast pocket. His tie too patently expressed the sporting note in infinitesimal checkings of red and white.

"Any hope of our getting the first article this week, eh, Bayard? I don't want to press you, old

man. But if we could have it for the April number?" Mr. Twill drew down the corners of his mouth deprecatingly, as he rubbed one eye with the back of his thumb. There wasn't any smoke in that eye, Vergie told herself. It was his silly trick.

Louis Bayard came out of his thoughts, with his customary air of having been interrupted. But he was polite about interruptions. His mind stepped out courteously to meet Mr. Twill's inquiry. "This week? Yes, I think so. Thursday. Thursday?" He spoke with the precise enunciation of one who, from long use of another language, has learned to be respectful to his own.

He held out a pile of photographs to Vergie. "Do you like any of these?" he said, almost shyly. She put out her hand. How thin it looked in the wide black sleeve! For a moment, the pose of her hand was etched on Vergie's mind. It was dramatic, significant. Another woman wouldn't have taken the photographs in just that way. She turned them idly, faintly impressed with her own importance, with the fact that Louis Bayard had asked her if she liked any of them. Stately, intricate chairs slipped under her fingers, sending up a heavy scent of dynasty, patronage. The chairs spoke phrases: *Le Roi le veut; Dieu et mon droit.*

Presently she was studying photographs of more modern pieces. These graceful shapes evoked a desire for possession. The others were remote, lack-

ing in intimacy. She had enjoyed them merely as spectacles. Perhaps more for that quality of reminiscence: that frail trace of a heavy fragrance, as from an old vinaigrette.

A slender-legged powdering table of inlaid wood was adorable. Vergie coveted it. Some day, when she had achieved fame and money, she would have a table like that—perhaps that very table. Impatience touched her suddenly. Seeing the powdering table as her own, she wanted to show them, these others, in what terms they should value her. "Our most modern woman writer"—Mr. Twill would be amazed when he saw the reviews. Secretly he would feel chagrin that he had missed her rare quality; but he would pretend that he had known it all along. He would tell people that he had discovered her.

Louis Bayard was still spreading out the photographs, arranging them after some plan of his own. Vergie watched his hands: sensitive, living hands, which loved to touch beautiful things. Near them rested the hands of Mr. Twill; one of these took up the photograph of a small and elegant cabinet. The hand held the photograph out, while its fellow described a curve of appreciation. And Vergie saw that Mr. Twill was less concerned with the picture than with the hands which it served to display. It was a habit with him to look at his hands. They were white and shapely, with large, tended nails. He laid them back on the desk.

The photographs mounted in flat, glossy piles under Louis Bayard's hovering fingers. His hands were brown birds, hopping among the pictures. They were never quite still. Even when quiet for an instant, they seemed poised to take flight. Vergie saw her own hands. They were white peacocks, moving proudly over the pictures. She must use that in her book: hands like vain white peacocks. Mr. Twill's hands, spread out now on the desk, were quite different. They were wax hands, well-made and lifeless.

v

They spent so long over the photographs that Vergie was in haste to clear her desk and leave the office for the day. Elation quickened her. She had an agreeable, if undefined, feeling of escape. She was lunching at home. Roger Vane was coming, as he often did on Saturdays.

Vergie saw his dark profile outlined against the green curtains at the window, as she let herself into the apartment. He had made himself comfortable in an easy chair, where he sat gnawing the inside of his cheek; and, taking off her coat in the hallway, Vergie smiled at the sight. Memories, revivified by her thoughts of the night before, stirred in her mind. She recalled the depths of bitterness and worldly wisdom which she had once fondly read into Roger's

eyes. She had been a senior at college when they met, and her tales of his cynicism had proved wonderfully impressive to the other girls. Deliberately she tried to summon her young respect for him, as an unusual and impressive person. It was hard to imagine. He now seemed merely a moody man, intelligent, ironic, amusing.

She greeted him pertly, and for a minute or two they sat pretending to find fault with each other. That was the game they always played. A good armor against sentiment, Vergie told herself; and even after all these years, she couldn't help realizing that Roger still seemed to feel the need of armor.

He began to talk of Harriet, with his almost feminine pleasure in observing personal traits, analyzing details of character.

"Harriet is a disappointment," he said didactically. Roger always issued statements—never ventured opinions. "She is sunk in domesticity. Gracefully sunk, if that's any satisfaction—drowned in it, anyway. She's as pleased and complacent as though the institution of the Home were her own private discovery."

"Very charming and feminine, I think," said Vergie.

"Harriet used to have lots of interests," Roger went on. "Economics was just a fad with her, but

it was better than nothing. Yes, I really preferred her as she was in college—with her hair pulled back, and that wide-eyed, expectant look of saving the world year after next. Marriage had ripened and ruined her. You know my theories about women. . . ."

"I certainly do," Vergie said. "Make no mistake about that." She pretended to stifle a yawn, but Roger disregarded her.

"Women," he said with assurance, "are nothing but a compound of sensuality and vanity. Their other qualities are frills, non-essentials. But they'll never admit it—their vanity, of course, prevents them. And men, more complex animals, are incredulous of the possibility of such elemental natures."

"All except you," Vergie said. "You know, don't you?"

"In your way, you're nearly as complacent as Harriet," said Roger, frowning at her, "and with far less excuse. You've had the advantage of being analyzed by me. Now, you're the sort of woman who ought to marry. Domesticity need hold no terrors for you. You'll never be wholly absorbed in anything outside yourself. When are you going to marry, anyhow?" He eyed Vergie sharply beneath his lowered brows. "You're not considering little Crump seriously, are you?"

"No, that's all off," Vergie told him. She shook

her head admiringly at Roger, in tribute to his perspicacity. "How did you know about little Crump?" she asked. "You manage to find out everything. I thought I had concealed him rather well—meeting in the office, so convenient and everything. I'm afraid I just escaped that boy. He's such an eager little advertising solicitor. And he was so nice during office hours, I felt sure he would be kind in the home."

"That," said Roger, "is a more naive feeling than I would have credited you with having."

"He wore light blue cuff buttons and a signet ring," Vergie continued reminiscently. "But it didn't seem to matter. I was in one of my more domestic phases—settling down was an attractive thought—and I wanted him, anyway. I got that possessive feeling, the idea that I must take care of him and darn his socks—just like the ladies in the problem plays. He had it, too. I wore storm rubbers for two months last winter to please him——"

"What could have interrupted so ardent a courtship?" Roger inquired.

"I stopped in time," Vergie explained. "The first warning came when I began to notice his shirts. They kept recurring regularly, like boarding-house meals. It got on my nerves. First a blue-checked one, then a pink striped one, then a white one with a darn near the collar. . . ."

"It's a pleasure," said Roger, "to find a woman

so sensitively organized." He sat forward, his elbows on the arms of his chair, his long fingers laced together across his vest. "But this possessive feeling you speak of? When did you acquire that tendency? I don't remember your ever displaying any possessive feeling when I was around."

"No," Vergie told him. "No, I don't remember feeling possessive toward you. I'm giving it up permanently. Feelings like that have been the undoing of many a girl. It's so easy to spoil your life! I'm going to make a name for myself." Her thoughts turned inward, and a smile played over her face. She beat her hands together softly, absently. Roger watched her with a look which might have meant disappointment. For the moment Vergie had forgotten that Roger was there.

vi

The door slammed, having admitted Mrs. Stilson and Pet.

"Roger here already?" Mrs. Stilson amiably asked. She lumbered into the living room, her face complacent as she greeted him. She approved of his attentions to Vergie. He was rather queer; but you couldn't have everything in a man. Roger was a smart fellow, a steady young lawyer.

"He was here before I came in," Vergie said. "Perfectly at home in the most comfortable chair."

"That's right," observed Mrs. Stilson. She

slightly altered the position of an ashtray and two books on the table, with a happy sense of producing order. "That's right. We're always glad to see Roger." The last words were pronounced with a hint of elegance: her duties as a hostess.

Pet, plump and rosy-cheeked, turned on Roger a shining, oblique glance. She sat down near her mother, her manner faintly conscious. One boyish hand she laid on the arm of her mother's chair. There was something indefinably filial, affectionate in the gesture. It seemed to tell the others that she was her mother's little girl.

They talked casually, producing scraps of information and comment. Roger always behaved admirably in the family circle. Sometimes he even went so far as to call Mr. Stilson "Sir." It amused Vergie, but her father seemed to like it. He appeared now in the doorway, a staid, old-fashioned figure. His absent manner gave an impression of formality; but his face lighted as he saw his younger daughter.

"Well, Pet!" he said. His arms stirred, ready to move toward her.

Pet went to him, dimpling, ready for this new rôle. She put up her face for his kiss.

"How's my girl?" he asked, patting her shoulder.

"That's a very unfair thing," Roger objected. Sometimes, when dealing with families, he assumed quite a Rotary Club manner, Vergie thought. He

liked to tease Pet with whom he had often played when she was a little girl. "It's a rule of the house not to kiss any man unless you kiss all the men present," he said, walking over to her.

"What house?" Pet asked. Her lips formed a smiling pout.

"Any house I happen to be in," Roger told her. He put his arm around Pet, and she raised her mouth. Two red lips moved up to Roger's smilingly, confidently. That wasn't a little girl's kiss!

"Pet! I'm surprised!" her mother murmured. There was a catch of dismay in her voice; and Vergie knew that it wasn't caused by the fact of the kiss, but by the ready gesture with which Pet had lifted her mouth. Where had she learned that? Vergie remembered Frank, the curly-headed boy with whom Pet danced and skated and went to the movies. Frank looked so harmless. But, of course, it was easy to forget how things were at eighteen. Probably Pet wasn't really different—only more honest than girls had been ten years ago.

"Roger's my big brother," Pet said. "Aren't you, Roger?" She giggled, the corners of her wide gray eyes crinkling. The moment seemed to lend her poise. Before them all, her elders, she appeared a new Pet, grown-up, too, by virtue of having received attention. She began to chatter about her own affairs, about the incidents of her morning. She was no longer mother's little girl. Her words were ad-

dressed to all of them; but her warm sidelong glances were for Roger.

Vergie peeped at the watch on her wrist. Ten minutes still remained before luncheon. An impatience with the chatter, with the familiar presences of the others, disturbed her. Her own preoccupations were insistent. She slipped from her place on the couch, and went to her room.

In the hall, her mother's steps sounded heavily. She came to Vergie's door. "Vergie," she addressed her daughter in a loud whisper, "anything new today? Are you going out with Roger? It seems to me you're seeing him pretty often again." Her face, twitching with curiosity, endeavored to wear a look of casual interest. It could be read that her inmost emotion was a desire to understand her child.

"Don't you worry," Vergie told her. "You can't start a romance between Roger and me. Girls nowadays don't marry every man they go out with."

Mrs. Stilson withdrew into herself. "I know that," she said with dignity. Her manner made it clear that Vergie should have realized she knew that.

"Anyway," Vergie continued, "Roger isn't the kind of man that marries. He's the kind that has affairs."

"How do you know?" inquired Mrs. Stilson. Suspicion was revealed in two steely points in her eyes. "He never said such a thing to you?"

"No," Vergie answered. "I can tell it by his socks."

Her mother left the room, and Vergie closed the door gently after her. She turned toward her bookcase, where she had concealed her work of the preceding night. There, behind the books on the top shelf, were the yellow pages out of which her novel would be made. She stood quite still for a moment, feeling her day leap upward to this pinnacle, this point of shining light. From behind the books she drew the sheaf of papers, and sat down by the window to look at them.

vii

A small table stood near her chair, and she pulled it closer, in order that she might spread the papers on it. She sorted them into piles, deliberately resisting the impulse to begin reading them. Her hands were white peacocks treading the yellow papers. Her careful fingers moved more slowly than Louis Bayard's, which were brown birds, hopping, pecking. She took up the first sheets and began to read.

On these pages was life, abject, comprehended. She, Vergie, had caught and bound it. That was why her fingers moved proudly among the yellow papers. With a long breath she absorbed herself in the notes she had made. Time, as she read, was forgotten. She did not remember Roger or her family, chatting in the living room. The pages held her utterly.

Yet, this first part was not the most interesting. After all, anecdotes about children were always much the same; everyone was doing them these days. She laid aside the first sheets, and turned to later notes. Their bloom and significance she did not immediately rediscover; the incidents and descriptions seemed curiously dull. She searched now for one splendid bit, a paragraph it had stirred her to recall as she sat at her desk that morning. . . . Something was gone. Vergie ran her fingers quickly through the pages. They were all there. What could be gone?

It couldn't be merely that her mood had changed, that she missed the excitement of the night before, the enthusiasm of her swirling thoughts? It couldn't be that? The query raked her mind. Her fingers were trembling, but she set herself coldly to look again at what she had written, to judge it dispassionately. Something droned in her ears that these jottings were not even related to one another. She tried not to listen, but the droning was insistent. Where, it asked, was their magical unity?

Why, they were just her memories!

With something sick and chill under her heart, Vergie saw they were only her memories. These notes recorded the scraps of the past: things such as everyone remembered; things dull people persisted in telling you.

viii

She found herself looking down at a pile of torn yellow papers in the lap of her black dress. She took the sides of her skirt in her hands, and walked slowly to the waste basket. There she let the yellow pieces fall, a drift of autumn leaves.

"Lunch, Vergie!" It was her mother's voice.

"Right away," she called in answer. But she did not move. "I'm not a great person after all," she said to herself. Tears of self-pity filled her throat. She could have sobbed in a passion of disappointment. But at least she hadn't told anyone. No one need ever know how close she had come to proving herself second-rate.

"Vergie! Lunch!"

On the wall of her room was the picture of a woman. She was gazing into her own reflection in a pool, and her face wore an expression of satisfied vanity.

"You fool, you fool," Vergie said. Her self-disgust hardened her. She went into the dining room.

She moved in a little hush, which protected her. Through it pierced the complaints of the others at her delay. To her father alone it was a matter of indifference whether Vergie came to luncheon on time, or not. The rest were clamorous. And it seemed to Vergie that they were not attacking her so much as the quiet of the small dining room,

faintly redolent of creamed tuna fish and hot tea. On the quiet they fell, tearing and rending and worrying it. It hung about them in ribbons.

"Don't let them tease you, daughter," her father said. Vergie looked at him with surprise. He must, then, believe her accessible to the meanings of this confusion. Yet he, in speaking, came back from some inner remoteness as absorbing as her own.

Pet was a round fruit, crimson-cheeked. "Isn't Vergie's face a perfect triangle?" she asked Roger. She felt that the moment was giving her a delicious advantage over her sister.

Their voices mingled, rising and falling persistently. "I forgot to tell you," Roger said to Vergie. "I have tickets for the symphony this afternoon. Can't you and Pet go? Your mother has another engagement. . . ."

"I'm going over to the Ninety-second Street Theater with Mrs. Nordlinger," said Mrs. Stilson. She seemed glad to record this social contact.

"I'd love to go," Vergie said. "Let's start now." She rose from the table, released by the idea of action and change. "Do you suppose you'll like the music, Pet?" she asked her sister.

"Of course, I'll like the music. What do you know about what I like? I know just as much about music as you do."

"Now, Pet. . . ." her mother began.

"Don't call me, Pet," she said. "No one in this family is ever to call me Pet again." She grew petulant, her flare of temper dying. And she looked around at her father to make sure he understood he was included in the new ruling. "My name is Helen," she added, by way of closing her argument. Roger's amused eyes met hers, and she smiled, a little girl's ashamed smile.

Out of the unreality of the apartment, Vergie moved into the stinging air. She looked with gratitude at Roger. He was at her side, dependable and familiar. Something in her was freed by a sense of the fluidity of life, which forever admits of change. The bright, vertical city rose about her, sharpened by its covering of snow. She was no longer shut in a silence slit with voices; she was moving up a snow-bordered street, murmurous with the stirring of motors, the purr of the city. Soon she would have lived another endurable day.

Not enough, not enough, a passionate voice within her cried, that days should be merely endurable! But she did not heed the cry. She was indifferent to it, as she was to the voices of Roger and Pet, which blended impersonally with the other sounds of the street.

She was alone with her sense of the flux of living. Life moved on, moved on; so little happened. Happiness was as ephemeral as a hairnet. And hope passed with a curious want of dignity.

II

CHAPTER IV

i

The appointment of Harriet's living room was a gay embroidery worked on a background of cream-paneled walls and reticent gray rug. Its decorations were pretty and elegant. A visit to Harriet always inspired Vergie with a longing for possessions of her own; with a wish to surround herself with an equal, if more subtly characterized, luxuriousness. On an afternoon late in March, she sat on a soft couch and sipped a cup of tea, looking about her at the upholstery of deep rose velvet, the upholstery of cornflower blue taffeta, and the tinted stars of the lamps.

Harriet, tranquil in pale silk, presided over a low tea table. She was relaxed, matronly; the slightly austere Harriet of college days could scarcely be discerned, though she retained the dignity which had distinguished her before her marriage to Brace Andrews, a well-favored man in good clothes, who sat near her. He was talking to Dannet Holden, a man somewhat less well-favored, in clothes not quite so good. The latter's flattened, sheep-like face nodded wisely in response to Brace's words; and he settled his stiff, high collar with one forefinger,

while his eyes moved uncertainly behind their glasses toward Roger who was talking to Vergie and Harriet.

"I have to go home," Vergie said.

"You always have to go home," said Brace Andrews. He interrupted Dannet Holden's mild sheep-face which was speaking earnestly to him; and his words reproached Vergie, because he liked her and did not want her to go home—but also because he had been trained in the tradition of never seeming to want anyone to go home.

"Stay for dinner," Harriet suggested. She rose from the tea table, and came to stand beside Vergie, poking her shoulder softly, as though that might help to induce her to stay. Vergie looked at her, reading her quite clearly; a lovely wife, draped in pale silks designed to modify the impression that she would soon be a lovely mother. "Dannet and Roger are staying," Harriet went on. She turned to Dannet and Roger for confirmation.

"Not tonight," Roger said. But Vergie saw that Dannet's light eyes swam toward her behind the glasses of his tortoise-shell spectacles before he answered.

She shook her head, her face upturned to Harriet's. "Awfully sorry I can't. I have to be a dutiful daughter tonight. Mother's expecting some friends." But she thought it was a pity that she had to leave the deep rose background of the couch,

against which her black hair must look sleek, jetty.

"I have to go, too," said Dannet Holden. "Thank you just the same, Harriet." The moment revealed that a happy expectation had died in him. For two years, in the intervals of selling bonds, he had bestowed on Vergie his mute devotion. To his simple nature, preoccupied with financial fluctuations, she appeared a creature too capricious to be understood. Now, as she left the room, he swallowed uncomfortably. He turned again to Brace, with an uneasy sense that their conversation should be neatly finished off.

Harriet followed Vergie into the bedroom. "I had a letter from Leigh," she told her; she found the letter in her desk. Leigh, their roommate at college, had married the professor of economics at a Western university, and was now the mother of four children. Vergie and Harriet sat on the bed and read her letter, feeling it warm them with sympathy for each other. Words, phrases, drew them together, because they revived associations of the past, and also because they reflected an alien manner of living. Catching the strange odor of another environment, they found each other familiar and congenial. Their shoulders and hands touched as they bent over the letter. They spoke of Leigh with a tempered regret; wondering what had happened to her elfin face and unrhymed verse; agreeing

sadly what must have happened to her uncorseted figure.

"Four children on a professor's salary! Isn't it really horrible?" Harriet said. But her serene oval of face remained calm, unstricken by the contemplation of horribleness. And Vergie's feeling of sympathy for Harriet disarmed her, robbed her of the ability to be critical, made her vulnerable to Harriet's influence. For the moment, it seemed most desirable to be like Harriet.

"Are you sure it isn't a mistake about your baby?" she asked her. "I've been given to understand that utter slimness. . . ."

"No mistake. Early in April," Harriet said. She smiled with satisfaction, pleased, like all women in her condition, to be told that her figure was miraculously unaffected.

"How exciting!" Vergie said. "It's something happening." She looked at Harriet out of her long, dark eyes, which betrayed her desire to have something happening, too.

"You ought to get married," Harriet said. She walked to the mirror, and arranged her draperies contentedly. "That's something happening." She smiled; sweet, rooted, a lovely vegetable.

"I'll consider it," said Vergie. Her tone was light, but she meant to consider it. "The men I would marry are impossible. You can't expect me

to look at Dannet Holden every morning at breakfast for the rest of my life. Or little Crump."

"You're too critical," Harriet told her. "And besides no one gets up for breakfast any more. Why don't you take Roger? You could have him any time."

"Roger's too queer. Lately he's been even worse. And he's an old story. Harriet, you know it wouldn't do." Yet, when they went back to the living room, she looked at Roger thoughtfully. His face was melancholy, abstracted.

"You haven't asked me to dinner in a long while," he told her.

"But he's been there," Vergie said to Harriet. "He had dinner with the family last week, while I was disporting myself with little Crump. I don't know what's getting into Roger, he's so attentive to families."

Roger didn't answer. He looked at Vergie silently. His face, she saw, was worn, there was a double line at either side of his thin strip of mouth. She felt suddenly sensitive, clairvoyant. She saw into Roger; he was another person like herself. He, too, was dissatisfied; he, too, was seeking restlessly. "Divine discontent—" . . . . "Rather I prize the doubt—" phrases, phrases; compensations devised by other minds, similarly distressed. She took Roger's hand in hers, clasping it firmly. "Come to dinner Friday," she told him.

ii

She hurried home, yet a reluctance slowed her steps as she approached the house. It was going to be a bad evening, though it held potentialities of humor, if she could bring herself to regard it humorously. Mrs. Stilson was expecting her neighbor, Mrs. Nordlinger, and the latter's nephew, Royden Peck. As Vergie opened the door, her mother met her and followed her into her room.

"This fellow, Royden Peck, is in the publicity business," she began at once; and she peered at her daughter to ascertain if the news were good or bad. "Mrs. Nordlinger has told him so much about you," she added.

Her meaning was to Vergie crystal-clear. In these few words, she saw the story of her mother's hopes and ambitions most lucidly delineated. And she resigned herself. "What do I have to wear?" she asked. She stood docilely before her mother, who breathed contentment to find her child so simple, so compliant.

"I think you look nice the way you are," she told her. "I wouldn't change." Vergie remembered Mrs. Nordlinger, and decided that her mother was right.

Mrs. Nordlinger and her husband occupied an apartment in the same house with the Stilsons; and she and Mrs. Stilson had been welded together by

a campaign against insufficient heating during the previous winter. She was the sort of woman who is known as "ladylike." She had earned this reputation, partly by her own mention of the fact, partly by her finicking accent and her habit of bowing deeply in greeting or farewell. Her hats were invariably large and black, set on the precarious angle associated with the name of Gainsborough. She was a member of many clubs and liked, laughingly, to speak of herself as "a born leader."

Mr. Nordlinger was a slight improvement. It was poor picking, but he was a little better. Vergie liked his unpretentiousness. She liked his Elk's tooth watch-charm, his frank removal of his coat in warm weather, and the manliness of the black cigar which he sometimes left in his mouth while talking. There was something simple and honest in his calling Mrs. Nordlinger "Mama," though there was nothing to substantiate the title except an old fox terrier named Prince. Vergie did not feel that she could have enjoyed these vagaries of Mr. Nordlinger for long at a time. But on the rare occasions when they met, she found in him something tonic, something spiritually in revolt, undominated by ladylikeness.

iii

The Stilsons, father, mother and elder daughter, dined. After dinner, Mr. Stilson retired to his

room, with the fifth volume of Carlyle's "History of Frederick the Great" under his arm. He was devoting himself to a conscientious study of this work; from his orderly progress through its volumes he derived some vague satisfaction understood only by himself.

"I guess Friedrich will be better company than 'Mama,'" he told Vergie. A faint smile visited his lips, the bare suggestion of triumph. He was aware that his daughter was trapped for the evening.

Mrs. Stilson took up the evening paper, with the idea of scanning its more important news before the arrival of her guests.

"Where's Pet?" Vergie asked her.

"Out with Frank," her mother answered. Her words recalled some anxiety, which rose to her eyes, troubling them. She lowered the paper, shaking her head balefully. "She sees too much of him."

"He's a nice little boy, isn't he?"

"For all I know," Mrs. Stilson replied. "For all I know." Her mournful tone suggested depths of depravity beyond her ken. "It's nothing to laugh at these days, with young people marrying the way they do. You don't know what a mother feels——"

Pathos might have swamped the conversation, but the doorbell sounded an interruption. Mrs. Stilson hurried into the hall, and a clatter of greetings, pierced by a treble barking, was heard. Ver-

gie rose to meet Mrs. Nordlinger with a pretty gesture of welcome.

"Miss Stilson, may I present my nephew, Royden Peck?" inquired Mrs. Nordlinger, with an air of such graceful importunity that Vergie regretted her own pretty gesture. Her hand touched Royden Peck's for an instant; but the greeting was cut short by Mr. Nordlinger, who came jovially forward, cigar in hand.

"Well, well, well," he said heartily. "How's the editorial department tonight?" Vergie looked apprehensively at Mrs. Nordlinger. It seemed that a life of contact with so crude a being as Mr. Nordlinger must wither and blight her delicacy. But she was seating herself carefully, taking no notice of him. Her invulnerable ladylikeness negated, denied the mannerisms of her husband.

Prince waddled in and began a half-hearted survey of the premises. Behind Mr. Nordlinger's back, Mrs. Stilson mouthed noiselessly at Vergie: "Get your father."

Vergie went to tap on the door of her father's room. "You'll have to come out," she told him. "Mr. Nordlinger came. Prince, too."

He had anticipated the summons, and his spare body came through the doorway almost at once. "I heard them," he said resignedly.

In the living room, they exchanged banalities, the *hors d'oeuvres* of conversation.

"Awfully nice of you to come," Vergie found herself cooing, falsely.

"Well, it begins to feel like spring, but I notice they're still giving us heat," Mrs. Stilson essayed. But she was washed aside by the eloquence of Mrs. Nordlinger. This lady had settled herself in an easy chair near a lamp; its light fell revealingly on her details. Her hair had recently been put up on curlers and, from the evidence of the ruffled stripes which crossed her head, it was patent that their number had been three. Her nose glasses had a gold chain which terminated in her coiffure. The flat pancake of hair on top was caught by the gold pitchfork of the chain, like a placid whale, skillfully harpooned. Her cushiony body was enclosed in a covering of light silk.

"Royden was downstairs five or ten minutes before we came up," she told them. "Just as we were going to leave the apartment, the telephone rang. Of course! Did you ever know it to fail?" She looked around to see if anyone had ever known it to fail. "It was that impertinent janitor," she said, and she passed a proprietory hand over her bosom, as though to quiet its alarms at the recollection of impertinence. "He informed me that the tenants in the apartment next to ours had made a complaint about little Prince—about his barking when we leave him alone. You know what the meaning of *that* is." She looked at Mrs. Stilson, and her eyes

narrowed, if the eyes of anyone so refined could be said to narrow. "I don't believe those people ever uttered a syllable—she seems to be very much of a lady. But you know how the janitor has acted, ever since we won out about the heating." Her gaze moved to the hissing radiator, the symbol of their triumph.

There was a moment of silence which no one ventured to break. "I should, by rights, simply have hung up the telephone receiver, and sent Mr. Nordlinger down to deal with him. But Mr. Nordlinger is so easy-going—to a fault, I sometimes tell him. And Roy—" she shook her head, smiling a tired lady's tolerant smile—"Roy is dreadful. He just makes friends with everyone. I had to swallow the impertinence and say nothing. So I brought Princey up with me tonight. He can stay here where no horrid people will criticize the little doggie, can't he, Muvver's Darling?"

She patted her narrow area of lap as an invitation to Prince. After several frustrate leaps, he succeeded in making the ascent. The story was now seen by all to have ended. Mrs. Nordlinger always made her entrance on an autobiographical wave. A relaxation came over the group.

"The weather isn't so cold for March," said Mrs. Stilson, undiscouraged in her effort to make this point. "But I see they're still giving us plenty of heat."

iv

During Mrs. Nordlinger's recital, Vergie had had an opportunity of observing Royden Peck. He was seated opposite her on a desk chair which was too small for him, and he had an air of patronizing his inadequate seat in a friendly, humorous way. His were the good looks which come from manliness, an even temper and sound health; he belonged to the peculiarly American type, known as "clean-cut." It was a face lacking in subtlety, but sharpened by enthusiasm and humor. Vergie was pleased by its quality of youth and happy aggressiveness. The ladylike blight had not fallen on Royden Peck. His easy manner bore no relation to Mrs. Nordlinger.

The group disintegrated. Mr. Nordlinger engaged Mr. Stilson in discussion at one end of the room. He related an incident with evident relish, and occasional lapses into loud guffaws; and, seizing Mr. Stilson by both knees, he leaned forward to drive home the climax of his story. Again, Vergie could not forbear to glance at Mrs. Nordlinger. Her composure made Mr. Nordlinger's guffaws incredible, sounds conjured by a disordered imagination. She let Prince slide to the floor, and, drawing a piece of linen from the small silk bag on her padded wrist, set to work at embroidering a monogram with dainty fingers.

"For my niece," she told Mrs. Stilson. "Royden's

sister, Mertie. The marriage is to take place in June." She stabbed the taut circle of linen, which gave forth audible plunks, like a tiny banjo.

Royden Peck left the desk chair, and came to sit beside Vergie on the couch. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked. His manner expressed that amiable expectation of pleasing which almost always pleases; and his white teeth showed in the ready smile of a man who smiles often. He was so near to Vergie that she became aware of a current, an attraction, which emanated vibrantly from him. She entered the radius of his presence, which she sensed, like a change of temperature.

"My aunt tells me you write," said Royden Peck.

"Well, if you can call it that. . . ." It was clear that Vergie couldn't call it that. "Editorial odds and ends. You do publicity?"

"Yes. Great game," Royden Peck said confidently. He seemed to straighten and expand, and he set his jaw more firmly. The man of business was evident for the moment.

"Don't you young people feel you have to sit around with the old folks," Mrs. Nordlinger called to them playfully. "Must they, Mrs. Stilson? Royden said something about the moving pictures." Mrs. Nordlinger had never been conversationally introduced to the term "cinema," or she would have used it.

Royden Peck looked inquiringly at Vergie. "Per-

haps you scorn such lowbrow entertainment?" he suggested.

"Of course not!" she told him. She gave a gay, disclaiming laugh. "I'd love to go."

"Come on, then," said Royden Peck. He was on his feet at once, making his excuses to the others. "You won't hold it against me, Mrs. Stilson, if I steal your little daughter for the rest of the evening?"

In the hall, he held Vergie's coat with exaggerated deference. "Lovely fellow," Mrs. Nordlinger's voice floated out from the living room in genteel comment on her nephew. "Just a friend to everyone. Universally liked. His father was the same —my brother Elmer." Her tone informed them that her brother Elmer was no more.

Vergie went to straighten her hat, and powder her nose. Her cheeks, she saw, were becomingly flushed; and she added a crimson scarf, pulling it softly, carelessly, about her throat.

"Wonderful to his mother," Mrs. Nordlinger was heard to be saying; and, as Vergie and Royden Peck opened the door of the apartment, the voice followed them in a yet more impressive repetition, "*Wonderful* to his mother."

v

The night air was fresh, and Vergie drew the fur collar of her coat closer. They hurried up the street,

almost running because of the sting of the chilly air after the overheated apartment. At the corner of Broadway, Royden Peck stopped, gesturing toward a drug store.

"Let's have some candy," he said. They stepped into the lighted shop, and he gave his order. "That's it, Buddy," he told the clerk. Something in him was rubbed bright by this casual contact. "Don't trouble to wrap it," he added.

He bent over Vergie, with warm solicitude for her pleasure. "Have a soda?"

"Some hot chocolate," she suggested. They perched on high stools before the marble counter.

"Make it two," Royden Peck said to the soda clerk. "I bet you swing a mean hot chocolate." He sat at ease on his high stool, at once the comedian and the friend of all mankind.

"No one swings any better," the clerk assured him. He filled two thick mugs with steaming chocolate, and swirled a spoonful of whipped cream on top of each.

"Not much art to that," Vergie thought.

But Royden Peck applauded: "That's the stuff, fellow. You know your business."

Side by side on the slender stools, they sipped the hot, syrupy mixture.

"I love drug stores because there are so many things in them besides drugs," Vergie said, observing the serried, shining details, which it seemed might

at any moment slip and rearrange themselves in another pattern, no less intricate and bizarre.

"Just what I was going to say," Roy agreed heartily. "Now, take French drug stores—I was in Paris for a time during the war—they're, well, they're just *drug* stores. Awfully literal people, the French. No hot chocolate, no camera supplies, no powder and lipsticks in their drug stores. I'll tell you, I was glad to see an honest-to-goodness, hundred per cent U. S. A. drug store again." He drew a reminiscent sigh, as he went to pay the cashier. His simplicity and exuberance moved Vergie to laughter. He was so clear, so readable, that she wanted to tease him. She couldn't resist commenting on his chosen rôle, making fun of him a little.

In the doorway of the drug store, she raised her dark eyes demurely to his face. "I know more about you than you think," she told him. "Shall I tell you what I know? Well, you're the boy with the personal touch. You belong to clubs and societies and organizations. You talk to strangers in trains and hotel lobbies. Usually you turn out to have met their brothers-in-law in Oil City in 1916. . . .

She paused, her eyelids fluttering. Royden Peck looked down at her with surprise. "Some little kidder," he murmured.

"And everybody calls you Roy," Vergie finished.

"Yes," he said suddenly. "Everybody does. Will you?" He leaned over her with new assur-

ance, having caught the spirit of this game. They smiled at each other with dawning friendliness; and happily together they went out into the chill and movement of the electricity-studded night.

vi

They approached the spangled arc of the moving picture palace, and entered its spacious foyer, decorated in white and crimson and gold. Roy, the box of candy under his arm, secured tickets; and they passed into a great, darkened semicircle, peopled with quiet ghosts. They stumbled over the feet of certain ghosts, found their places; and the spell of the cinema fell on them, too. They sat companionably before the mimic world of the screen. Now and then, in appreciation or ridicule of the adventures set forth, they gave each other a glance of understanding. The darkness seemed to draw them closer together, and sympathy grew between them, because of their isolation among so many dim strangers, whose faces were intently lifted to the shifting square of silver.

Then Vergie was troubled by the recurrent thought of how easy it would be for her to touch Roy Peck in the darkness; by how narrow a margin their hands and knees were parted. She had a feeling of loneliness, a wish to be close to someone; and suddenly she knew that these thoughts had come to her from Roy, from his scarcely per-

ceptible gestures of desire. His restless hand, on the arm of the seat, so near her hand, had told her. She had caught it from the stealthy movement of his head, as he turned to observe her profile. Roy's earlier mood of banter had given way to a constrained silence. Vergie became aware of her own heart beats. She heard Roy's quick breathing.

The last flicker died away from the screen, the lights flashed on, and the theater came to life. The ghosts arose and walked; their mystery dissipated, they appeared as matter-of-fact men and women, dulled by long attentiveness. Slowly they surged up the aisles, nearing their release in the wide foyer. At the door, Roy Peck was forced ahead of Vergie by the crowd, and she saw how smooth and clear his skin was, how boyish the back of his neck. Behind his ears, the skin was pink.

In the street a new confusion of lights and faces met them. They moved among them vaguely, for the world without now seemed as unreal as the world of the screen had been. They turned into a narrow side street, walking in the direction of the river. A clear wind drove through the street from the water; and they walked into the wind between the rows of sleeping houses. Few passersby came through the dark street. Their own rhythmic steps sounded sharply in the half-silence.

They crossed Riverside Drive, and stood above the river, gazing down at its misted darkness; at

ships, gaudy as Christmas packages, with red and green streamers of lights; at the shining, desolate track of the moon's reflection. Roy slipped his arm through Vergie's, as they looked; and to them both the world seemed full of beauty, though not more beautiful than it had seemed in the moving picture theater.

"Wonderful night," Roy said in a low voice.

"Wonderful," said Vergie. They were silent again.

But the wind from the river chilled them into discomfort. They turned reluctantly away. Slowly they crossed the street, under the blond flare of the arc-light, and entered the broad, marble-lined hallway where they aroused a sleepy negro elevator boy from his meditations.

"When am I going to see you again?" Roy asked. He tried to make his tones casual, but his voice was husky with the importance of the question.

Vergie raised her face. Though she was tremulous, she must not confess it. "Sometime soon?" she suggested. She even enjoyed a slight show of indifference. "Let's see." She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I'm rather busy this week, I'm afraid. Why don't you telephone me in a day or two?"

"I'll do that," Roy assured her. As he put out his hand in farewell, he became aware of the square box under his arm. "Why, see here, we forgot about

the candy," he said. "Can you beat that? I bought it for you, then I never gave it another thought. You certainly turned my head, young lady. Here, take it, it's yours, you know." He held out the box; and, as Vergie accepted it, his hand closed impulsively over hers and clasped it. For a moment, his hand pressed hard on Vergie's. Then abruptly he removed it.

"Look here," he said, as he turned to go. "I'll call you Friday. All right with you?"

Vergie felt her hand fumbling with the key of the apartment. It was the hand which Roy had pressed, and it moved now uncertainly, inexpertly. Her body walked quietly in, and the latch clicked behind her. She tiptoed down the hall in the silence of closed rooms and waiting night light. Her clothing was soft under her fingers, as she slipped it off in her small bedroom; and she let down her hair carefully, laying the pins in an orderly cluster on the dressing table. But actually she was not in the apartment at all. She was speeding on a high place, galloping on a mountain top above clouds. She had a feeling of coursing life, as though she had taken a cold plunge. Her lips were burning.

Of course, this was living, this was life! It seemed incredible that she had, even for a time, forgotten. A short while before she had tried to catch at life by writing it down, and it had hurt to find

warm life escaping her. She would never make that mistake again. Life was sensation, excitement.

Vergie sat down at her dressing table. With a wish to prolong the flavor of the moment, she lighted two candles and gazed at her reflection in their faint, flattering glimmer. She took the hand-glass and studied her profile and the back of her head. Turning to the mirror again, she tried different expressions, making her face demure, disdainful, imperious, tender. She threw back her head, and looked ardently into her half-closed shining eyes.

Her cheeks were hot, and she laid cool palms against them, laughing to herself. When Roy Peck left her, his hand had tightened tremulously over hers. Before her, on the dressing table, was the box of candy, the foolish box which he had forgotten. Vergie placed her hand on it, and, shutting her eyes, lived again that moment when Roy held her hand in his. She saw his boyish face, its expression of uncertainty and longing when he said good-night.

Recollections scurried through her beating brain. She remembered Dannet Holden, his eyes swimming around to look at her; little Crump, hovering over her desk in the office; Roger's reproaches, Mr. Twill's flatteries, chance looks of admiration from strangers. "You certainly turned my head, young lady"—that was what Roy had said to her. She

was one of the women who interest men, move and disturb them. "Life slipping past. . . ." It was a stupid phrase! Women occupied with ardent living had no time to worry over phrases.

She ceased to think. This was no time for analysis. Now she wanted nothing but to float in a warm bath of sensation. She dropped to her knees beside her bed, resting her head against it. But that wasn't enough, she had need of a more dramatic gesture. She stretched herself on the floor, her face and body pressed against the roughness of the carpet. Waves of exultation swept over her. Her heart beat fast. "Every inch of me is alive," she whispered to herself. Luxuriously, she sensed her vibrant body. In her neck a little pulse began to throb, as though to tell her: I, too, live.

Her excitement slackened, gradually. Vergie became conscious of the discomfort of the hard floor, the scratching of the rug. The room was chilly. How dramatic it was to be lying on the floor in emotional abandon! Stupid women, nerveless, anæmic, commonplace women, wouldn't think of doing such a thing. She was so carried away that she might not get up for hours. Perhaps the first streak of dawn would bring her to herself, remind her that she had spent the whole night on her bedroom floor.

Perhaps she would be ill, after staying there so long in the chilly room. Roy would come to see her, as she lay still and white, a fever spot on either

cheek. And, picturing Roy's solicitude, Vergie rose stiffly from the floor, and prepared to go to bed. She moved blindly, still half-entranced. Willingly, she delivered herself over to emotion. Her critical intelligence she was content to stifle. On the wall beside her bed, she saw the woodcut of a woman beside a pool. Its philosophy she did not recall. It conveyed to her only the recollection of Roger's admiration for her.

Sleep came to veil the lively flicker of her fancy; she imagined that she sat watching a moving picture of which she was the enchanting heroine—Vergie, the lovely, the desired.

CHAPTER V

i

THE first day of spring weather saw Louis Bayard wafted into the editorial offices of *Good Taste,* like a last year's leaf, borne on the gentle air. In his manner there was a trace of pride, for, in spite of his tendency to be absent-minded, he had finished an article at precisely the time stipulated.

Vergie sat at her desk where the breeze from the open window ruffled the papers. She was wearing a small hat of green straw.

"I suppose it means it's spring—your little green hat," Louis Bayard said.

"Yes. Hadn't you noticed?"

"Perhaps I really hadn't. I've been working hard—thinking of other things," he said apologetically. "Last year I was in Sicily when the almond trees were in blossom," he added; and Vergie smiled with sympathy, understanding that his words were his assertion of sensibility.

He produced a sheaf of typewritten papers. "Here's my article." He looked up quickly, expectant of Vergie's gratification. But her glance had strayed to the jonquils in a glass on her desk.

He laid the article with the other papers which the breeze was fluttering.

"Well, Bayard! It's good to see you." Mr. Twill issued from his sanctum. His waxen face and form seemed that morning to exist for the purpose of displaying his new spring overcoat of finely modulated gray. "Ready, Vergie? Come with us, Bayard, we're just walking up the Avenue to look at some hooked rugs."

"Very well," said Louis Bayard. He turned to Vergie, who rose slowly from her desk, relinquishing the jonquils. She was wishing that she need not leave the office—for this was Friday, and Roy Peck might telephone at any time. ("You certainly turned my head, young lady.") Reluctantly, hearing those words, she took up her purse, her gloves. "If anyone calls me this morning," she said to Miss Aronson, "be sure to take the message."

On Fifth Avenue, crowds were weaving colorfully. The buses, running up and down the street like clumsy green beetles, seemed to wear an expression at once more wistful and more agile than usual, as though mildly intoxicated by the heady fragrance in the air.

"By Jove," said Mr. Twill. "You can smell violets to-day." He settled his shoulders complacently in his new overcoat. "You ought to have a big bunch, Vergie." A florist's suggesting to him a completer expression of his fancy, he led the way

into the shop. While waiting for the violets, he selected a daffodil for his buttonhole and thrust another into the buttonhole of Louis Bayard. Vergie tiptoed about the tiled floor, in the damp, earthy atmosphere. Why was it, she wondered, that florists' shops always smelled so much more like cellars than like flowers? The clerk came forward, holding out the violets, which were tied with streamers of purple ribbon; and Mr. Twill presented them to Vergie with a gallant bow. She took the soft bunch of moist blossoms, her dark eyes opening wide as she thanked Mr. Twill. Louis Bayard was waiting at the door. Above the yellow daffodil, his grave face was brown. The faint distaste with which he raised his chin moved Vergie to think that he didn't like the daffodil—that, if he had not been so courteous, he would have jerked it from the buttonhole where Mr. Twill had painstakingly inserted it.

When at last they reached the small gallery where the hooked rugs were on exhibition, Mr. Twill glanced at his watch; and his neat face fell, as he saw the time.

"Good God!" he said. "It's far later than I thought. There's that wretched appointment at twelve." He regarded Louis Bayard covetously. "I'll have to lunch at the club. Why don't you come with me, Bayard?"

"No," Louis Bayard said. "You're very kind,

but really not to-day. I'll stay and see the hooked rugs."

Mr. Twill shrugged his regret. He drew down the corners of his mouth, making the face appropriate to a shrug. "Sorry," he said. "But I'll see you soon. Get a good story, Vergie. I know you'll do it delightfully—something rather amusing and feminine for the Country House Number." He hailed a taxi and was whisked away.

ii

"You're interested in hooked rugs?" Vergie asked Mr. Bayard.

Under his brown mustache, his lips smiled at her doubtfully; then he spoke with great firmness. "Oh, yes, very," he said.

They entered the gallery. The forepart contained a collection of Early American furniture and glassware; and beyond these they came upon a display of dining-room tables of various sorts and sizes, each suitably set with glass and silver and china. Vergie examined the tables with interest. She regarded everything in the light of its desirability as a possession of her own; and she began to arrange a delicious little dining room for herself.

"That powdering table," she said to Louis Bayard, for her imagination having settled the dining room, was running on to other rooms, as well. "You

know, the inlaid one that you have a photograph of. I want to have one like it."

"That belongs to me," Louis Bayard said. "It's a very fine piece."

"It's wrong for a man to own it," Vergie told him, "such a feminine bit of furniture." She was interrupted by a heavy lady, seen to be scuttling toward them. It was Mrs. Lutes, who was in charge of the exhibition of hooked rugs. Her hair, shortened stubbily as if it had been singed instead of cut, was a deep red, not unrelated to purple. Her ears and bosom were verdant with jade.

"Mrs. Lutes?" Vergie asked. She assumed her questioning manner, which she used when she meant to be especially courteous. "I'm Miss Stilson from *Good Taste*?" She made this into a question, too, as if she wanted Mrs. Lutes to confirm it, before placing confidence in it herself. "We have some photographs of your rugs, and wanted the material for a story?"

Mrs. Lutes grew vocal in a Southern accent as thick as mucilage. She began to sing the beauties of her rugs. An unexpected vein of lyricism developed in her. Showing a physical vigor in striking contrast to the poetry of her speech, she lunged impulsively about, displacing rugs in a whirlwind. The floor, the chairs, the tables heaved with billows of rugs, cast up by the elemental violence of Mrs. Lutes. There were all manner of patterns: dogs,

lions, squirrels, checkerboards, bunches of roses, petunias, futurist designs. There were old rugs, new rugs, bright rugs, dull rugs: all grouped together by the magic bond of having been hooked.

"To think, just to think," twittered Mrs. Lutes, waving one heavy hand toward some modern designs, "that these beautiful, beautiful rugs (isn't that little one a dream, it sells for only $25) were made by our own American women. Our own American women." She turned to Louis Bayard, as if hoping that he might share her emotion.

"This little jewel I want you to notice especially," Mrs. Lutes told Vergie. "Oh, and this perfect darling! I'm showing you the orange rugs, because I know you'll like them. Orange is one of your colors, isn't it, honey? I feel it in you that you respond to it."

"Yes," Vergie said uncomfortably. Louis Bayard had considerately walked away, when Mrs. Lutes began being personal. "Yes, I do like orange."

"I was sure of it," said Mrs. Lutes, making no secret of her triumph. "I could see you were artistic. You're like me. I respond to color wonderfully."

iii

Louis Bayard remained at the other end of the gallery, and Vergie from time to time cast nervous glances in his direction, while she listened to the

honeyed tones of Mrs. Lutes. She had a guilty sense that she was detaining him; and once she thought he had gone. But he had been merely obscured by a maple wardrobe. He wandered presently into view, and began to examine an ancient corn-popper.

As soon as she could escape from Mrs. Lutes, Vergie hurried to him. "Why did you wait? It's too bad. That dreadful woman."

"It's quite all right," he said. "I was glad to wait." He looked at her with his quizzical frown, one eyebrow drawn up higher than the other. Nice dogs sometimes had that funny, worried expression, Vergie thought. "Will you lunch with me?" Louis Bayard asked her.

She hesitated for only an instant. Roy Peck surely wouldn't telephone at lunch time.

"And we could talk!" she said.

They went to a French restaurant where they chose a table by the window. Vergie liked the foreign little room; she guessed that Louis Bayard often came there. Lunching with him was a different matter from lunching with little Crump, who was conspicuously chummy with the head waiter—or with Dannet Holden, who, on the other hand, behaved with embarrassing self-importance. Louis Bayard's manner was nicely lacking in either familiarity or arrogance. He selected a wine, as a

man to whom wine, under whatever flag, is a necessity: without ostentation, without jest.

The order given, Louis began to talk. His abstraction vanished; from his fluent phrases floated the bouquet of other places, other times. That he was a delightful luncheon companion, Vergie was quick to admit—yet, through some freak of mood, she found it difficult to listen. His words fluttered past her; heard, not apprehended. She forced herself to nod and smile as she nibbled nervously at the leaves of her artichoke.

On the appearance of coffee, a strange brew in thick glasses, she peeped secretly at her watch. She was impatient to return to the office; and, pursuing the motive for this, she recognized that her preoccupation had been caused by the thought of Roy Peck's telephone call. Roy Peck was the presence which stood between her and enjoyment of Louis Bayard's conversation. For, of course, Roy would find such talk very dull: highbrow, foreign stuff.

She acknowledged her lack of sympathy with the criticism, at the same moment that she confessed a secret wish to have Roy, instead of Louis, seated opposite her at the small table. Louis simply failed to reach her, the barrier of her mood came between them. Today she longed for green leaves, the trickle of sap. Speaking of impersonal topics with

his pleasant, precise inflections, Louis seemed a dry branch. He might as well, Vergie thought, almost with indignation, have been talking to a man. Now his restless hands began to make bread pills out of a scrap which the waiter had neglected to sweep from the table. Once she had thought those hands were like brown birds—a stupid simile! They were merely fussy brown hands.

She drew the violets from her belt and pressed them, cool and fragrant, to her mouth, hiding a tiny yawn.

"I wanted to buy you those," Louis said abruptly. Vergie's eyes widened, surprised. His thin figure, aloof at the door of the florist's shop—sulking like a schoolboy because Mr. Twill had bought her the violets! She felt a new impulse of interest in Louis. But he did not pursue his advantage, and soon they left the restaurant. He was taciturn as they rode down the Avenue. When he rose to leave the taxi, Vergie saw the back of his neck, which was lean and brown above the collar of his foreign suit. Behind the ears, the skin was not pink at all.

She clasped his hand warmly, as she told him good-by. He had been very kind; and perhaps, she thought, she had brightened his day by lunching with him. The daffodil in his buttonhole mocked his face like a wicked yellow eye, as Louis Bayard took his leave with an old-fashioned courtesy, a grave regret.

iv

Vergie hurried into the office, where the typewriter was clattering smartly under the fingers of Miss Aronson. "Did my telephone call come?" she asked breathlessly. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, as she waited for the reply.

Miss Aronson nodded her head slowly. Before she spoke, she readjusted a painful hairpin. "Yes," she said. "One o'clock. I was out at lunch. The operator said the gentleman didn't leave a message."

Vergie threw her small green hat on the desk, and sank into her chair. "Of course!" she said to Miss Aronson; and only the memory of Mrs. Nordlinger prevented her from adding, "Did you ever know it to fail?" She drummed her irritation on the edge of the desk.

There was nothing to be done but to wait until Roy should telephone again. Vergie rolled a sheet of paper into her typewriter, and tried to force her mind to return to the subject of hooked rugs. Now she could take no pleasure in the soft air, or the sunshine on the plastered walls of the office. The violets, she was annoyed to find, had made a wet spot on her dress. It was a nuisance to wear flowers.

Vergie stared at the blank page in her typewriter. She had the most boring life in the world! She had to sit in a stupid office and write—"something rather

amusing and feminine for the Country House Number." Mr. Twill dashed off to his club, leaving her with Louis Bayard—it was, of course, Louis Bayard's fault that she had missed Roy's phone call.

She struck the typewriter keys sharply; under her fingers, Mrs. Lutes came tumbling, and Vergie heard again the drip of her tones. She saw hooked rugs tossing in colored heaps; and Louis Bayard, stepping dejectedly from behind a maple wardrobe. He had been ill at ease, dispirited. How differently Roy Peck would have felt! He would have made friends with Mrs. Lutes, met her with boyish cordiality and enthusiasm.

The telephone on Vergie's desk rang sharply. She clutched it, spoke eagerly into the mouthpiece. It was only the art editor; and, answering his questions, she heard her heart's flat disappointed pounding. The moments pattered past. Mr. Twill came dapperly into the office; left again. Thoughts of Roy filled Vergie's mind persistently, as the prospect of seeing him grew remote.

She had hoped that they might take tea together; and she had imagined her graciousness, as she gave him sugar, lemon—or perhaps Roy would take cream. She had seen herself smiling, widening her dark eyes as Roy looked into them. But now the office boy made his last rounds with letters and memoranda and proofs. From the ad-

joining offices came sounds of departure. Vergie sensed the finality of the mechanical beating of typewriter keys: almost done for tonight, they snapped. Throughout the great office building, desks were beginning to clear.

Miss Aronson closed her desk, the typewriter falling into its vitals with a thump. She left the office, with handbag and hat. Presently she returned, smartened, immaculate; snow-white, rose-red.

"You don't want anything more, do you?" she asked Vergie. "I have to meet my friend. . . ."

Vergie sat alone in the unfamiliar silence. The telephones were shut off, there was no prospect of hearing from Roy now; she remained from listlessness, rather than expectancy. Through the window, in the blue mist of evening, she saw dim shafts of buildings, shot with golden squares. She felt the day's descending wings.

In many glowing rooms, over the pleasant disorder of tea, girls were laughing gayly, as she had dreamed of doing this afternoon. She was pierced by the thought that perhaps a laughing girl was having tea with Roy—for wherever that young Roy might be, there would be laughter. Vergie dropped her head on the desk. Helplessly, she discovered herself caught, defenseless, suffering. She acknowledged it to herself: I am suffering.

Faint noises sounded, a dragging pail, disturbed

waste-baskets. Feet shuffled along the corridor. A door opened and closed. With scarcely a respite from the day's activities, the offices had been invaded by the work of the night. Then a new sound made Vergie raise her head. A hasty stride rang sharp on the composition flooring of the hall, drew nearer. Someone, not a scrubwoman, was coming to the office. The steps slowed irresolutely, paused. Vergie turned on the light which stood on her desk. The steps advanced confidently, and Roy Peck appeared in the doorway.

v

He came to her, and their hands touched. She felt her life rhythmic in this contact of fingers and palms. Her hand was burning. In contrast to the disappointment she had felt, the moment was heightened into consummation, fulfilment. But all she found to say was, "Why—where did you come from?" It did not seem inadequate.

In the circle of light from the desk lamp, they peered at each other. The look on Roy's face brought tears into Vergie's throat. Why, Roy was young, young! His smiling lips were young. He sat on her desk, leaning over her and poured out the story of his day. He had had to make a hasty trip out of town in the early afternoon—he had just returned. When he found that her office telephone didn't answer, he had come straight over on

the chance of finding her. His words tumbled out quickly.

"Vergie," he said, "you have to stay down to dinner with me. I want to see you to-night, I must see you. I've been thinking of you such a lot. Listen, there's a meeting of a bunch of people, the Stragglers, that I belong to, a club. It's one of their ladies' nights tonight, would you go with me?" He paused, his parted lips eager, hopeful. "It might be fun," he said.

"Of course," she told him, "I'll go." Her eyes rested on his flushed face, while she called the number of the Stilson apartment.

Presently, her mother's voice came; distant, plaintive at first—then outraged, as it made response to Vergie.

"Stay downtown for dinner? You can't!" it said. "Did you forget you asked Roger tonight?"

"What's wrong?" Roy asked Vergie softly.

"I asked someone to dinner tonight. I forgot—" But disappointment was unendurable. "Mother," Vergie said, winningly, regretfully, into the mouthpiece of the telephone, "isn't that too bad? Roy Peck wanted me to go with him tonight—such a nice party. I hate to miss it."

There was a faint, impressed stir at the other end of the wire. "Roy, you call him now?" The intention of the voice was an amiable sarcasm. "Getting on pretty fast, aren't you?" The wire

buzzed for a moment, then the voice spoke again. "Well, if it's something special—maybe Roger wouldn't care."

"Do you suppose you *could* fix it up with him?" Vergie asked. "Tell him I'm so sorry—something came up that I couldn't help. Do you think you could?"

"I guess it'll be all right," said her mother. "Pet's home."

Vergie's lighted face conveyed the decision to Roy. She pulled on her small green hat, and they went out into the spring evening. They walked silently through the dusk, until they discovered a restaurant to their liking. There they found their secret mood invaded by the sharp lights, the tinkle and clash of service, the waiter's spasmodic rhythms. They grew voluble; and Roy began to talk about his work, his interests, as though he could not tell Vergie enough about himself.

"Publicity," he assured her, "has a lot more to it than some people realize. Let me tell you it's a science, a new science." He looked youthful and convincing. Spiritually he was now the after-dinner speaker. "There was publicity before our day? Granted. There has always been publicity—of one kind or another. But you can't speak of the old and the new in the same breath. I'll tell you, we're living in a great age, ladies and gentlemen!

Big things are being done today, and in a bigger way than ever before."

The last two sentences of Roy's speech were made in a spirit of burlesque, which Vergie was learning to recognize as his favorite form of humor. He would pronounce a hackneyed phrase with burlesque intonations, speaking the words with meticulous care which implied derisive quotation marks. It was clever of him, Vergie thought. She liked to know that Roy realized that talk about big things being done today was inflated Chamber of Commerce eloquence, which it was the province of right-minded intellectuals to ridicule. For all his good-will toward his fellow men, Roy could be sardonic with the best of them.

"It certainly is great to talk to a girl who can understand things," he said. This time, his tones held no hint of ridicule. It was clear, from his earnestness, that he believed he was making a new and fascinating statement.

"It's very interesting," Vergie told him. "I've never thought about publicity in just that way. Did you say you started as a reporter?"

"Such," said Roy Peck, "were my humble beginnings. I went to work shortly after my eighteenth birthday. My initial assignment was a fire on East Fourteenth Street. Though no trace of my story was to be found in the paper next morning, I was not discharged. Pity was shown to me be-

cause of my youth. I kept that job for six years."

Vergie nodded. Roy at eighteen! A tender little smile touched her lips.

"There's no use talking," Roy said, "newspaper work is the greatest training you can have. I wouldn't give up a minute of that experience. But it's a terrible life. Wearing! At the end of the six years, 'Came War,' as they say in the movies. When I got back from France, I heard of an opening with Holcomb and Hiss—one of the biggest publicity firms in the city. Yours truly applied for the job—and landed it. And there you have in tabloid form," said Roy, raising his eyebrows in preparation for a funny quotation, "the story of how one boy made good. That's the title, by the way, for a booklet I'm doing for a correspondence school. Great stuff. Would you be interested in seeing it? I want to get your reaction as an average reader—as a super-average reader, I should say. Pardon me, madam. Now, how does this strike you?"

He drew from his pocket a typewritten paper, which he spread before Vergie. "That's just the lead, of course," he explained. "Naturally it's the most important part of the booklet, because it catches the reader's attention. I've put a good deal of thought on getting it right. I may be mistaken, but I think it has a punch."

Vergie bent over the paper with what she felt

was a pretty absorption. Again, as at luncheon, she was acting a part; and she regretted that Roy found it necessary to talk so much about publicity. "The price a woman pays for a man's attentions," she told herself, "is hearing about his work."

"'How One Boy Made Good,'" she read aloud. "Oh, I like the title awfully. Is the story really true?"

"Yes, practically," Roy said. "Yes, it's true, in a way. Of course, I polished it up a little—dramatized it so as to bring out the high spots. For instance, this boy it speaks of didn't really have an old mother to take care of; you have to put in touches like that."

Stimulated by Vergie's show of interest, he outlined the rest of the booklet, writing the headings on a scrap of paper for her more deliberate consideration. Extraordinary, thought Vergie, how little you had to talk to men. It was, in a way, very restful. As long as you could keep the face lively and attentive, there was practically no strain.

"It's time we were getting over to Fred Stamm's," Roy said at last. "Time certainly flies in your society. You must have a fatal fascination for me." He looked about the room, almost emptied now of diners, with his air of genial authority. "Waiter," he cried, "the check! That's the stuff," he added, as the waiter produced it briskly. His

white teeth flashed in his agreeable smile. "The service is great," he humorously remarked.

vi

They made their way westward, while Roy still talked. Again he grew autobiographical, describing the months he had spent in France during the war; and with a mastery born of long practice he related a series of anecdotes, beginning respectively: "One night three of us were sitting in a dugout"; and "An old French peasant woman I was billeted with"; and "I've seen some mighty close shaves—this fellow just happened to bend over——"

Toward the close of this third story, they reached a block of shabby, reddish houses, whose pretentious size and lofty brownstone steps recalled an ancient affluence. Near the center of the block were several houses which had recently been remodeled. Stripped of their steps, they looked with barefaced impertinence on their old-fashioned fellows. Their fresh paint and plaster and their pert window-boxes of flowers gave them a patronizing air of bringing up the tone of the neighborhood.

Into one of these houses Roy and Vergie turned. As they mounted the narrow stairs which led from the ground floor, they heard an imminent bustle of laughter and talk; in another moment they had stepped into a vortex of people—the Stragglers. The host, Fred Stamm, pushed his way forward to

welcome them; and Vergie had a blurred impression of a bald, hearty man with a jovial pink pig's face. They left their coats and hats on a mounting pile, like a rummage sale, and stepped into the big, rectangular living room, which occupied the entire length of the house.

The room was furnished, as men often furnish, like the lounge of a club. Massive tables tested the solidity of the flooring. The couches and chairs were huge and padded, apparently intended for the leisure of elephants. Wide circumferences of light from substantial lamps fell on the assembled Stragglers. Vergie and Roy were drawn into the center of a group which eddied about them with greetings of "Hi, Peck!" and "Well, Roy, old man!"

"Nice little college girl I brought over tonight," Roy told Fred Stamm, who pressed forward at that moment with a tray of highballs. His rosy head was dotted with a fine dew, evoked by the energy of his hospitality.

"Help yourself," he urged Vergie with the emotion of a born bartender. "Nothing the matter with this Scotch, I can guarantee that. And don't pull any highbrow stuff around here tonight, will you?" he begged her.

Roy slipped his hand under Vergie's arm. "Come over here," he whispered, "and we'll find a place to sit. I don't want you to get all tired out the first thing."

From the depths of a big leather chair, Vergie observed the Stragglers with a more analytical eye. Clad in business suits, they moved about the long room, greeting one another familiarly; or bent over the more vivid of the women. Certain wives, home women, made a quiet fringe about the walls, having discovered one another by their dark blue georgette crêpe dresses.

"No one dolls up, you see." Roy leaned down to Vergie from his perch on the broad arm of her chair. "That's the nice part of these shebangs—just an informal good time. Great bunch."

Vergie nodded, appreciatively. She felt an antipathy to this self-absorbed crowd of strangers. The Stragglers seemed to be surrounding and overwhelming her; she was no match for them. But it was impossible to run away. She had no defenses except her flimsy barriers of dislike. With an effort to seem at ease she watched the various groups, sipping the drink which Fred Stamm had given her, and making little assured gestures as she knocked the ash from her cigarette into a round, thick ashtray of mottled ware.

"Now, I know," she said to herself, "who buys the ashtrays in the cigar store windows."

On the instigation of Fred Stamm, certain Stragglers began ostentatiously to find themselves seats, and to urge silence upon their neighbors. An inflated lady in a pleated tunic was hovering nervously

near the piano. Gradually the Stragglers, dampened by this sight, prepared to subside. Stifled, arrested, they offered the deference suitable to music.

The lady opened her mouth and sang in a silence broken only by the hushed arrival of newcomers. When she had finished, the Stragglers came to life again, expressing their revival in vigorous hand-clapping. A thin man with a solemn face now rose; was greeted with shouts of approval. This, the Stragglers might be understood to convey, was more like it.

"Oh, gosh!" Roy said. "It's Larry Wise. The playwright, you know. This'll be good. Hi, Larry!" He slapped his knee in an abandon of pleasurable anticipation.

Larry Wise stood for a moment, blinking glumly at his audience. Then he waved his hand with mock irritation, demanded quiet. He adjusted a pair of spectacles on his nose, and with scientific precision expounded a treatise on the subject of snoring. He classified the varied types of snores, giving deft imitations which evoked howls of amusement, usually at the expense of one of the group.

"Hey, Jim! That's Jim, all right. Hear yourself, Jim?"

"Never closed my eyes all night. I don't see how his wife stands it."

Vergie felt the heavy chair shaking, and she looked up at Roy. He was choking with laughter, and the

warmth of the room had made the color rise in his cheeks, as though claret had been spilled under the skin. She felt a wave of terrified loneliness. But Roy reached down and took her hand in his, pressing it firmly. Roy's hand brought comfort, security.

vii

The entertainment came to an end, and general conviviality reigned once more. Fred Stamm crossed the room, signaling to Vergie with his pudgy fingers.

"He likes you, I can see that," Roy told her. "He's a smart fellow, Fred Stamm—the art photographer, you know. You must have seen his work." He indicated vaguely the mammoth, framed photographs on the walls of the room.

"Come now, Peck," Fred bawled genially. "Aren't you going to give the rest of us a chance? I've been trying all evening to get a word with this young lady." Roy obligingly turned to a group of men who had that moment approached; "a few of my boon companions," Vergie could imagine him quoting, with a sardonic lift of the eyebrows.

"Is this the first time we've had the pleasure of welcoming you to our busy midst?" Fred Stamm asked. His ironical emphasis caught Vergie's attention. But, of course, she saw it all now! She had been catching stray hints ever since she had joined the company of the Stragglers. They all had the same trick of burlesque quotation as Roy!

Fred Stamm's roll of the eyes, his derisive enunciation of the phrase, "our busy midst," were reproductions of Roy's mannerisms. Vergie admitted the truth reluctantly; Roy's humor wasn't original—it was a Straggler institution.

"But now that I've found the way, you'll let me come again?" Vergie asked Fred. She spoke ironically, rolling her eyes, as he had done. Fred laughed heartily, pleased at such a pretty wit. The Stragglers had standardized their humor most conveniently; once you learned the simple trick, it was always possible to be amusing.

Vergie glanced at Roy. He stood nonchalantly among the other men, his hands plunged in his pockets. "Well, sir—" he was saying.

"Well, sir!" Vergie shivered. But, of course, Roy was only making fun; ridiculing for the moment the ebullient Middle Westerner.

"You can count on Roy to be the center of a group," Fred Stamm said. "A general favorite. And good to his mother," he quoted satirically.

But Vergie was hearing Roy's voice, clear above the chatter of the other Stragglers. ". . . and one night the three of us were sitting in a dugout and . . . " She turned quickly to Fred Stamm, determined to shut out the sound.

"Such a lovely place you have here," she cried. "Roy tells me you've just moved in. You must

have enjoyed arranging everything—and it's *so* charming!"

Fred Stamm was delighted. "Come and let me show you the rest of the house," he urged her. "I've got a great little dining-room downstairs." Vergie followed him to the dining-room, where a buffet supper was being spread; then they went upstairs to inspect the bedrooms. She was still murmuring her admiration, when they returned to the living-room. Roy hurried forward, as they appeared.

"Thought I'd lost you," he called. "How do you like my little college girl, Fred? Been taking good care of her for me?" His presence diffused the warmth of the good humor which glowed in him. His aggressive, kindly face was handsome. "There's some talk about supper being served," he told Vergie, as Fred left them. "Let's satisfy the inner man. I'm feeling able to sit up and take nourishment. How about you?"

They descended to the dining-room, which was filling with people; and there followed a confusing period of introductions and talk. At last Roy whispered the suggestion that they might go. In the quiet darkness of the street, Vergie felt the night air wash consolingly over her hot cheeks. As they walked between the shabby, blind houses, the kaleidoscopic vision of the Stragglers gradually ceased to jerk before her eyes.

"That's a great crowd," Roy said. "I hate to miss a gathering of them. Lot of very brilliant men there." He took Vergie's arm in a clasp which expressed possession and caress. Her heart jumped at his touch.

They had reached the corner of Seventh Avenue, and stood on the curb, facing the wide empty street, which seemed to have been swept miraculously clean by the soft breeze of night. An old-fashioned taxi turned a corner, and came fitfully toward them, wheeling agreeably in response to Roy's signal, like a heavy dowager, pleased at being noticed.

They entered the dark cabin of the taxi, which smelled curiously like a stable, and sped unevenly northward. In the cubical solitude an intimacy returned to lay its spell on them. A wave of emotion moved over Vergie, and she braced herself to meet it, not daring to look at Roy, who was strangely silent at her side. Of course, he was going to kiss her. She wondered if he knew she knew.

His hand groped at her sleeve, trying to find her hand. Roy said huskily, "Vergie!" She relaxed her hand, let it slip into his. He drew the hand to him, and held it in both his own, examining it. Then he lifted the hand to his lips.

He put his arm around her, and she could feel how quickly his breath was coming in little gusts. "These are the moments, these tremulous first," a

detached corner of Vergie's brain was thinking. "It's never so moving afterward." Roy kissed her cheek delicately, just touching it with warm lips, as if he were making a test, seeing if it would work. He leaned back and looked at her, to see if it had worked. Then he kissed her cheek again, firmly, fervently.

He was kissing her lips. Somehow he had gathered her close in his arms. She was crumpled against him, crushed in an embrace which was redolent of wool. His lips were over hers, and Vergie tasted, curiously, appraisingly, their soft fruitiness, the mingled flavor of coffee, cigarettes and shaving soap, the distinctive chemical something-else which was Roy. A hot knife stabbed her suddenly, in response to his passion. It was gone, but Roy was still kissing her.

Her nose was pressed painfully to one side. She tried to move it a little, without great success. But a bent, red nose would be unbecoming.

Up there was the roof of the cab. A piece of it was torn. This was a long kiss! But it was never tactful to draw away; better let him have his kiss out. How the button of his coat was pressing against her wrist, the one which was caught between them! It hurt, but not unbearably—not as much as a squashed nose.

Why were men's chins always scratchy, even the best-shaved of them?

Roy was gathering her up more closely, convulsively, as though he had just begun. Once more a sharp thrill darted through her. "Vergie, dearest, dearest," Roy was saying on her mouth. Something shaking, blinding closed over her at the whispered words. His head dropped to her shoulder. He was a little boy, tired out; his hair disordered, his face damp and flushed. Why, she loved him! She held him tenderly to her breast.

CHAPTER VI

i

The steps of the Good Shepherd Hospital were dark with April rain. Vergie, pursued by the scattering drops of a fresh downpour, pushed back the heavy door and gained the warm, institutional pallor of the entrance hall. The reception clerk, a girl in starched white, sat at a telephone switchboard near the door.

"I want to wait for Mr. Peck," Vergie explained to her.

"He's in the board meeting." The girl, eager to be of assistance, indicated closed double doors at the end of the corridor. "Shall I let him know you're here?"

"Oh, no, don't interrupt him. I'll wait."

Vergie went into a small reception room, sparsely furnished with stained wicker and commonplace cretonne. It was Saturday afternoon, and she had an enjoyable sense of leisure. From a chair near the doorway, she watched the reception clerk at her duties.

Her anxiety to please and her evident inexperience inspired Vergie with sentimental memories of her

own early efforts at earning a living. Fresh from college, after a brief course at a business school, she had taken a position as stenographer in a bank; and her mind had been divided by the respect and the contempt which she felt for the new standards into which she was initiated. It had been a phase of living, a game she had played for a time. Underneath her nervous young diffidence, she had secretly known it was just a game—the lately academic Vergie in a new rôle; a detail in a line of snapping typewriters, with fingers like pistons, demeanor as starched as her blouse.

ii

A copy of the April number of *Good Taste* lay among the magazines on the table of the reception room, and Vergie began to look through its pages. "The bus driver's holiday," she said to herself; confessing that, save for Louis Bayard's article, the number was, as Mr. Twill had feared, rather flat. Louis Bayard's style was simple, expressing infinite condensation, precision, refinement of thought. There was the crackle of wit in all that he wrote, and she could, as she read, imagine his voice pronouncing the words: that slightly husky voice, with clipped and careful enunciations.

It was embarrassing to turn immediately afterward to the captions for the page of photographs headed, "Sunrooms of Distinction." Her own man-

ner of writing was smarty, feminine and meretricious. And, besides, what an irony there was in describing interiors and possessions, when you couldn't have them for your own! Vergie sat forward in the wicker chair, her lower lip caught between her teeth. Distinctly, as in a colored moving picture, she saw herself in a beautiful room—her own. Against the subtle and exquisite background, she moved lightly, bending over fragile masses of flowers, caressing with sensitive finger tips a fragment of old jade. Guests were announced, and, gracious in pale, clinging silk, she crossed the room to make them welcome. . . . Then there was the perfectly served dinner; a narrow table, candle-lighted . . . lace, silver . . . colored glass. . . . Roy's bright face above the black-and-white of dinner clothes. Roy? But, of course, Roy. Some corner of her brain was showing a maidenly reticence, pretending surprise. She jeered at this coy corner. Certainly, Roy!

His face, conjured up, persisted in flickering before her eyes. It was the face she knew, yet its aspect was changed. There was the same dark hair, brushed smoothly from the brow; the same shining eyes and ready smile. But she saw a new expression of dignity, reserve and finesse. There was a hint of elegance in the poise of the head and shoulders, and in the motion of the restless hands. Vergie caught the clean line of the profile, as Roy turned to

Harriet, from whose rapt attention it was possible to conjecture the pithy, pungent phrases he must be pronouncing. He bent over her in his boyish, enthusiastic way—there was a flash of authentic brilliance in his words. Now, Brace Andrews leaned across the candle-lighted table, anxious to catch what Roy was saying. . . .

iii

A woman carrying a baby entered the small reception room of the hospital and sat down near Vergie. Round and agreeable, the baby lay in her lap, and, with that peculiar placidity into which infants sometimes fall, drowsily surveyed the room. It yawned widely, and then opened and closed its tender rosette of mouth twice, as though to settle it again. It was a luxurious child, in a coat and bonnet of corded silk; and Vergie imagined the delicious appointments of its bath, its bed, its boudoir. She thought again of Harriet, amiable fecundity in chiffon. After all, one forgot about babies! Life went on, and the important things were side-tracked, lost sight of. That seemed stupid. . . .

But, certainly, she would have babies. . . .

Vergie forgot the baby in the hospital reception room. There would be adorable children of her own; three of them, all girls, she decided, hearing already the clink of their little voices. They would wear ruffled organdy bonnets and between the frill-

ings their faces would be sweet and grave, like pansies. They would be fat, and very busy. Vergie saw them trudging about, preoccupied with their own affairs; wearing out countless pairs of square black slippers, which looked as though they had been painted on their silly feet.

Later on they would become coltish, lengthening leggily, as if they had been stretched; level-eyed, hoydenish and frank, absorbed in sports and lessons and playmates.

She would be tactful when they grew shy in a sudden realization of their April, putting up their heads like timid crocuses. They would have pretty dresses, as clear as water-colors. Their interest in beaux and parties, their strict observance of certain proprieties and their outrageous neglect of others would be delightful and absurd.

Of course, a curly-headed son would be nice—with a laugh like Roy's. . . .

iv

The double doors at the end of the corridor opened abruptly, and men began to trickle slowly out. They were, it was clear, the Board of Managers of the hospital. They had gathered in special conclave this Saturday afternoon, to discuss the raising of a large building fund.

They oozed out of the meeting room, successful men, with an air of weariness about them. Vergie

noted several who were younger, more vigorous than the rest; these were the "new blood" on the hospital board, the "live wires," who would be counted on to push the building fund campaign. Yet they bore a startling resemblance to their elders. Their faces wore the same expression, at once canny and blank; and they, too, had that look of commonplaceness which one is always surprised to discern in a group of financially important men. To the hospital, the primary value of the Board of Managers was, of course, their financial importance; the fact that they could give largely, and had authority to command large gifts from others. As they stood in the corridor, having their last words together, it seemed that a sense of their power oppressed them, robbed them of the flippancy of eccentricity, reduced them to uniformity.

Among them all, only two men stood out. One was the professional campaign director, whom the Board had engaged to supervise the raising of their building fund. He scampered among the hospital managers like an excited fox terrier, jumping at them, barking in short, brisk sentences. His assurance challenged the attention of the weary, prosperous men. Gesticulating at them with a cigar, as though that might prove the conclusive factor in his argument, he seemed to symbolize confidence, energy, the will to power. Far more than these men of vast wealth, who appeared dulled and apathetic in

contrast to his vivacity, he represented the spirit of business success, as it is explained in popular brochures. "How one boy made good," Vergie said to herself.

The other disparate figure was that of the publicity expert employed by the hospital board. Without directly observing him, Vergie had from the first been aware of his straight, young shoulders and well-set head. She had deliberately avoided the confession of his presence, saving him up until she had studied all the others. Now, at last, she looked at Roy.

He stood in the center of the tiled corridor, his head attentively lowered, as he listened to the short, white-haired man who addressed him. Above his dark clothes, his face glowed with color; its expression of friendly deference was almost filial. The older man pumped Roy's hand affectionately, absent-mindedly, as they said good-by. He smiled at Roy. The ashes, thought Vergie, smiling at the flame.

The Board of Managers straggled away. Some of them went out at once; old men, hustled like children into their coats, walking carefully under umbrellas to their respectful motor cars. Others went upstairs on hospital business or a visit to a sick friend. Two stayed talking in the entrance hallway, drawing out their rôle of grave deliberation.

"Well, I could see Perkins, but it seems to me that you . . . "

The other drew slowly on his cigar. "You're the man to do it. What do you think, $5,000?"

"I wouldn't take a dollar less. . . ."

Roy hurried down the corridor to the reception room. At sight of Vergie, his face lighted with a smile of open, ingenuous pleasure; and, seeing his smile, Vergie felt clarified, made simple. At last she had discovered the answer to the most important problem—the right answer, the answer in the back of the book. Of course—amazingly easy, now that she knew it—it was finding the right man, building their life together with dignity and beauty . . . their home, their children, their love.

"Did you mind coming here for me?" he asked her. "I'm terribly sorry, that meeting came up unexpectedly. I thought this would save time." His eyes asked her to believe how precious time was. "Great meeting," he went on exuberantly. "These fellows are out for blood. They'll get it, too—wonderful set-up. Millions represented around that table in there. Did you notice John Boynton, the old boy I was just talking to? I don't want to brag, but I wouldn't be surprised if he threw some big business my way. Seems to have taken quite a liking to me."

Vergie was pierced by a little thrill of pride. She laid her hand on Roy's sleeve, pressed his arm tightly for an instant. He leaned close to her so that she could feel his warm breath on her cheek.

"I wondered if you would go home with me for tea?" he said. "We're only a few blocks away. That's what I was really hoping—if you'd like to. I want you to know Mother and Mertie—my sister."

"I think it would be lovely," Vergie said, unable to disappoint Roy by confessing what a dreadful prospect it seemed to her. He was obviously anxious for the meeting. The weight of social approval lay on his side. It was inevitable, after the happenings of the last ten days, that she must meet his family.

"Wait a minute till I call up," Roy said.

"I might as well have it over," Vergie told herself with resignation. She had a lively curiosity about Roy's mother and sister, about the background in which he lived. But, in the face of an immediate interview, the curiosity paled. There was no use in pretending that she expected to find Roy's mother congenial. Vergie opened her handbag and surveyed her face in the sliver of mirror. She gingerly added a trace of powder to her small nose; she straightened her hat.

v

"All set!" Roy cried to Vergie. "Taxi's waiting 'n' everything." The rain had come on with renewed force, but he disregarded it blithely. "Only a shower," he said, as he stowed Vergie in the damp interior of the taxi. "I think it's the clearing shower," he added optimistically.

The gray vertical beat of the rain paralleled the gray vertical houses. The pavements were black and streaming. Here and there a wrecked umbrella testified to the strength of the blustering gale. The taxi, slipping at the corner as though it were wheeling on oil, turned into Amsterdam Avenue, lined with shabby houses and shops. They skidded past a dingy street car which was tottering down its wet tracks.

It all seemed depressing, but she wouldn't give in to a mood, Vergie resolved. These formless apprehensions were absurd; and she raised her eyes fondly to Roy.

"I wanted you to do this for a week," he suddenly said, with a diffidence unusual in him. "Well, ever since I met you, really. I want you and—my mother to like each other. She's been awfully good to me."

Something in his voice at the words "my mother" stirred Vergie with childhood memories. Once "my mother," said that way, had touched a sentimental chord in her. She recalled Burke Barclay and the ten-twenty-thirty plays; tears blotted with a surreptitious handkerchief. . . . The catch in the voice of a tenor singing "Mother Machree" . . . "God bless you and keep you" . . .

She suspected an ironic intention, but Roy's lips were serious, almost tremulous. He met her eyes, took her silently in his arms. The deep breath he drew shook them both. The moment was big with

his emotion. His soul, stripped of defenses, revealed itself vulnerable, easy to hurt.

Why, he's a good boy! Vergie thought, gazing into his clouded eyes. Suddenly, she felt herself an odiously flippant, hardened person. She could have wept for her lost contact with the simple, noble things. It was easy enough to be cynical and disagreeable—for some reason, you thought it clever. Roy loved his mother, that was all. He loved Vergie. He wanted them to love each other. Simple enough! And how shameful it was to cheapen the finest things with sham wit, catch phrases. . . .

Vergie's heart had gone liquid, tender, in her breast. The taxi had slid and wabbled down a street in the Nineties, and stopped before an old apartment house of dun red stone, not far from Central Park.

vi

She skipped across the wet pavement and stepped into the entrance of the house, while Roy paid the driver. It was a gloomy hallway, barely lighted by a window of stained glass. Dingy mosaic tiling covered the floor. Far up in its black shaft an elevator creaked and whined. In time, it descended. Roy and Vergie entered the iron-barred cage, like a little jail, and were drawn upward, difficultly.

"Terrible old house," Roy whispered. His

jauntiness had returned with the necessity for action. "But rents are so high these days. 'The Housing Problem and How I Met It,' by Royden Peck," he quoted in a falsetto voice.

At the door of the apartment, he drew out his latchkey; but he thought better of it, and rang the button beside the door, instead. From an apparently great distance, steps were heard to sound. The steps drew nearer, and the door moved to a cautious crack, behind which a face might be guessed. Then the door was opened wide.

Vergie saw a large, thin woman, with a slightly flattened face, plain and regular of feature; not unlike the face of a gingerbread man before it has been baked. The face squinted its eyes at Roy and Vergie, with a look of meek resentment.

"Mother," Roy cried heartily, "this is Vergie Stilson I've told you so much about. We thought we'd run around for a little tea party with you this afternoon." As he spoke, he put his arm around his mother, and kissed her. Her face relaxed. She was seen to summon strength for a gesture of hospitality, as she extended her hand to Vergie.

"I'm real glad to meet you," she told her. Her clasp was perfunctory, yet not without a limp graciousness. "Come right in," she said.

They had been standing in the long, narrow hallway, as cosy as a tunnel, dimly lighted by an over-

head bulb, which was shrouded in a Chinese lantern. Mrs. Peck now led the way down the hall; single-file, in silence, they trod its length. A sour, damp smell arose from the apartment, as though it had been washed, but not aired. Along one wall were ranged closed doors, suggesting secret lairs: the bedrooms, the bathroom, the kitchen.

At the end of the hall they came upon the living room. It was small and glutted with furniture. A large, reddish mahogany table in the center bore a mission lamp with a green glass shade. The windows, a cluster of three, with shades sedately drawn, were curtained in dark brown; and the material had evidently been split lengthwise to form the pairs, which hung on a slant, in stiff, pleatless strips, like large bell-ropes. On the floor, before the windows, sprawled a giant plant, amorphous, with drooping, palm-like leaves, and conical fruits which resembled pink artichokes. Vergie sat down in a mahogany rocking chair.

"I will have to speak of the plant," she said to herself; and decided to save this fertile topic for a moment when the conversation flagged.

vii

Roy and his mother had seated themselves on a settee of dark wicker. "Where's Mertie?" Roy inquired.

"She just stepped out to the corner," his mother told him. By an obvious effort she kept her face tranquil, smooth like a mask. She wore a smile of set serenity. "She had to go and get some cakes. For afternoon tea."

"It's a darned shame," Roy said, "she went out in the rain for that. We could have brought something, just as well as not."

"Oh, too bad," Vergie murmured, uncomfortably.

Mrs. Peck brushed aside their protests. "My daughter is a fine girl," she explained to Vergie. "Always ready to do her part." Her lips moved and she sniffed. "I suppose Royden has told you she's going to be married. I'm going to lose her." A startling convulsion came over her large face, and she rose from her seat, taking from the table a photograph in a pedestaled gilt frame, like a miniature firescreen. She handed the photograph to Vergie without a word; yet her gesture carried the story of her sacrifice, her riven mother's heart.

Vergie saw the head and shoulders of a pretty young woman in a precarious cloud of tulle. There was a loose and curly coiffure, a single rose, the smiling display of perfect teeth. . . .

"A tooth-paste advertisement," Vergie said to herself. But she told Mrs. Peck, "She's lovely! How much she and Roy look alike, especially the smile. She has your eyes, I think. . . ." Her voice faded,

discouraged by the silence. Mrs. Peck had turned her back. She stood by the window, as nearly as the huge plant would permit her to do. It could be seen that this was no ordinary gazing out of a window, but a moment dreadful with suffering. Vergie heard the echoes of her own voice quiver and die. Mrs. Peck turned abruptly around.

"I thought I was going to keep her," she wailed. "My only girl, you don't know. . . ." She raised a handkerchief to her eyes.

Vergie's face grew hot. She wanted to run away from this indecency. She felt a childish hatred for Mrs. Peck, with her naked heart hanging out. The place for a naked heart was inside, inside. No one wanted to see.

Roy jumped up and went to his mother's side. He drew her back to the settee with affection and gentle raillery. "Now, Mother," he cajoled her, "you mustn't talk that way. I wouldn't upset myself, if I were you. And you know how you make Mertie feel."

viii

Mrs. Peck regained her composure with an effort; she sat quiet once more, her mask down. Her eyelids were lowered with an expression of meekness. "I'm not saying it in front of Mertie," she told her son, in the tone of one who has been unjustly criti-

cized. And Vergie, lacing her fingers nervously together, looked at the sprawling plant. Its hanging leaves turned toward the floor with a heavy air of humility and self-abasement. Yet what a powerful, tenacious growth it was . . . and prickly, defensive.

"Such a wonderful plant," she said politely to Mrs. Peck—for there surely could not come a moment when a little light conversation would be more needed—"so luxuriant . . . beautiful, so big. . . ."

Mrs. Peck sighed. "Yes," she said, "it's big. Too big. It's a great care. It's a drain on my energy." She seemed about to weep again, but she recovered herself and went on. "I'm not equal to giving it the attention it ought to have. I would be glad to give it to anyone who would care for it as I have." And she looked accusingly at Vergie, as one unfitted to keep her plant in the style to which it was accustomed.

The click of a key sounded in the latch. Steps came down the hall, a door opened, and they heard the gentle thud of a light package laid on a wooden table. Mrs. Peck tightened, nerved herself to face the excitement of arrival. Roy cried, "Here's Mertie! Hello, Sis!"

Mertie glided into the living room. She wore a dark suit, with a touch of white at the throat, and, in spite of the rainy day, she was perfectly shod, gloved and veiled. Vergie guessed that her own

tweed suit and hat would seem careless and shoddy to this trim being who floated forward to greet her. The kinship of Mrs. Nordlinger unfolded in her delicate handclasp: Mertie was ladylike.

"Take off your things," Mrs. Peck begged her, and Mertie left obediently. Presently she was heard again in the hall, and once more the kitchen door snapped open. While Roy achieved an animated description of the hospital board meeting, small suppressed noises arose beyond the thin wall. Now Mrs. Peck grew tense. Her spirit left the living room. Resolutely she kept her mask, and she even looked at Roy once or twice, nodding abstractedly at his story. But her lips were drawn in pleats, her eyes strayed furtively toward the muffled sounds. Mrs. Peck was seen to be a rubber band, stretching . . . stretching . . . at last, she broke. She sprang from the room.

Vergie felt a rush of pity for Roy. She suffered for him; but he continued to talk, not heeding the interruption. In the hall, his mother's loud whisper could be heard. "Come out. Come out. Come into the living room. I'll attend to everything."

Mertie came out. She took a chair near the window, light falling on her unveiled face. Vergie, as she saw her clearly for the first time, felt the ripple of a little chill. Mertie wasn't old, of course. But, even more strikingly, she wasn't young. The skin

under her eyes was like crape. It was still possible to discern the frail butterfly prettiness of her face. Yet it was marred, slightly weary; and it seemed to Vergie that the plainness of age was kindly, compared with this look of seared youth. Mertie adjusted the crisp white ruffles at her throat and wrists with dainty fingers, a lady's careful, pointing fingers.

Mrs. Peck's activities in the kitchen sent up an energetic rattle and clack. "What's Mother up to?" Roy inquired.

"She's getting afternoon tea," Mertie told him. "She won't let me help her. She'd rather do it alone." She looked over at Vergie and smiled, with a woman's instinct for explaining a situation. "Nerves," she said to Vergie with her lips, making no sound; and she nodded toward the kitchen noises with deprecation. Yet there was a hint of indulgence in the way she said "Nerves." So the scions of ancient families speak importantly of their traditional defects of temper, pride or obstinacy. It was clear that Mrs. Peck's nerves were the family cross, their distinguished deformity.

ix

The tea arrived, borne patiently by Mrs. Peck on a large tray. Room was cleared for it on one end of the mahogany table. Vergie, rousing herself to look pleased and expectant, felt a numb, despairing

resentment at the trouble she was causing. She hated Mrs. Peck because she was putting herself out to do her, Vergie, a favor. It was unnecessary—she didn't want the horrible tea! On the tray was a Japanese tea set in red and blue, pimpled with gold; the shallow cups were a bluish, dusty color on the inside. The sugar bowl was a balloon of cut glass, and there was a small plate, on which lay rounds of lemon, the rind nicked in little scallops. At the sight of the nicked lemon rind, Vergie melted suddenly. She had an instant of poignant understanding, which brought tears to her throat. This was a tea-party . . . fixing things for company . . . having everything nice. . . .

Mrs. Peck poured the tea, with shirred lips. "Well, look at all the cakes!" Roy exclaimed genially. He insisted that they comment on the number and variety of the cakes. His manner showed no constraint at the dismal ceremony of tea. He seemed not to mind the vast disturbance his hospitality had occasioned. With evident relish, he took his first steaming mouthful. "Touches the spot, doesn't it?" he demanded of them all. He indicated the spot.

The worst was over, once the tea had been served. Mrs. Peck carried her cup to the writing desk, where she ate by herself, like a bad child in a corner. Now and then she addressed a remark to the others, but for the most part she was occupied by the busi-

ness of refreshment. Under its soothing influence, she relaxed perceptibly.

"It settles my nerves," she told Vergie, indicating her empty cup. Her nerves settled, she was able to do the graceful thing socially. "But I have to be careful how I drink it. It gives me indigestion." She peeped around to see if Roy was engaged by what Mertie was saying to him. "Gas," she whispered to Vergie. "All blown up." She shook her head lugubriously, and Vergie shook hers back in voiceless sympathy. Mrs. Peck piled the dishes on the tray, and presently carried them to the kitchen. The faint clatter was resumed; and Mertie stepped out quickly.

"Mother, let me do that later."

A sibilant whisper answered her. "Just rinsing. Go on back."

"Haven't I got a pretty nice big sister?" Roy asked Vergie. He pulled Mertie down beside him on the settee, so that he could put his arm around her. He beamed on Vergie and Mertie with his sunny smile. His face shone with affection for them both; and he could not conceal his boyish elation at the success of his introduction of Vergie to the family circle. He moved his hand over Mertie's shoulder, patted her blond, tightly curled hair. "I don't know what we're going to do without her," he added, his voice lowered out of deference to the mother heart, still rinsing in the kitchen.

"Roy says you're going to be married," Vergie murmured politely.

"Yes," Mertie told her. The warmth of her joy was tempered by certain dismays. "It makes it hard, talking about it, with Mother feeling the way she does," she said. Her eyes lighted hopefully. "Maybe you would give me your idea, I'm not sure about the drapery on my wedding dress—" Mertie searched in the desk for a clipping from a fashion magazine. "How do you like that skirt?" she asked Vergie. They bent together over the clipping, and now something in Mertie came brilliantly to life. As she discussed the wedding dress, Mertie's soul flowered. A faint color rose to her cheeks, behind the lavender-tinted rouge.

"How terrible," Vergie thought. "The whole thing, marriage, the man, doesn't touch her like this dress." And she looked at Mertie's thin spinster's body, her pale cheeks rouged to the shade of a pink petunia, the precision of her hands and her clothing. "It's dreadful to wait too long," Vergie told herself.

Mertie held the fashion sketch in her hand, studying it. The inmost important core of her was concerned. And it might be read that to Mertie the dress was a lovely shrine, a delicate shining case, like a kid and satin jeweler's box, to exhibit more perfectly herself—that pink pearl.

x

Vergie held the arms of the rocking chair tight, and told herself that she couldn't leave yet. She kept herself in the chair, with a smile as genteel as Mertie's on her lips; she chatted with Mrs. Peck, who had grown more expansive, now that her chores were done. But at last she felt it was possible to rise and tell Mrs. Peck what a really delightful time she had had, and what a pleasure it had been to come to her home, just informally like this.

"I'll take Vergie home, Mother," Roy said. "Then I'll be back to dress. . . ."

Mrs. Peck's face shifted. "You didn't forget," he asked her, "that I'm having dinner with Vergie? We're going to the theater tonight."

But his mother's face remained uncertain. "Yes, he told you, Mother," Mertie said gently. "I heard him tell you."

"I must have forgotten," Mrs. Peck said. A sigh shook her broad flat bosom. "Royden's out so much," she said to Vergie. There was pathos in the look she gave her boy.

"Never you mind, Mother." Roy put his arms around her, thumping her back humorously. "I'm going to spend tomorrow evening at home. "We'll go to church together in the evening, shall we? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she said. She was simply pleased, like a child. She tried to keep a smile from her lips, but it forced its way to them. Happiness glowed in her face. "Yes, son." Her eyes were meek, but the corners of her smiling lips held a hint of triumph.

CHAPTER VII

i

VERGIE, walking into the stillness of her small room, sat down on the bed with her head between her hands. Depression as penetrating as the dampness in her clothing had seeped into the fibres of her mind. A moist tendril of hair lay chill along her cheek. She wanted the luxury of long weeping.

"What's the matter," her mother's voice asked. She stood in the hall outside Vergie's room, the door of which she had abruptly opened. Her stout figure was encased in a staunch armor of corset and brassiere, with a petticoat of durable black. As she noted Vergie's drooping figure, her face bristled with apprehension. "What are you sitting that way for?"

"I don't know," Vergie said. "I suppose I'm tired."

"No wonder," her mother said grimly. "No wonder. Gallivanting the way you do. Never resting. Let me look at you." She peered, frowning and curious, into Vergie's pale face, into her dark eyes which winced and turned away. "Were you out with Roy?"

"Yes," said Vergie. She began to take off her

damp skirt with listless fingers. "I went to tea at his mother's."

Mrs. Stilson's face grew astute. "Pretty serious, I guess," she said, with a conscious attempt at levity. But her eyes were anxious. "And Roy's coming here tonight. And you're going out with him afterwards. And goodness knows what-all next week." She enumerated the statements accusingly, like piled-up evidence against Vergie. "It looks pretty serious to me," she reiterated. "He's just a good friend, isn't he?"

The door slammed, and Pet thrust her face through the doorway, grinning; her cheeks, as red as prize apples, had been smartened by the flicking rain. "I've been out with Roger," she told them, jubilantly. "I went to his office to get him. We've been walking in the rain."

"Pet!" her mother cried. Her tone held the fine essence of distilled horror. "You're soaking. You must be crazy." She looked wildly at Pet, goaded by the tiny drops on her child's bloomy cheeks, her fluffy hair and woolly coat. "Change right away," he directed her. "Don't be lounging around in those wet clothes. Change them now." She stood for a moment, turning helplessly from one child to the other. Each was incomprehensible to her: the one who stood obtusely quiet, with black, staring eyes; the one who pranced, wet and wilful. "I don't know

what I've done," she told them, "to have two such children." Her thick figure removed itself from the presence of their unreasonableness.

Vergie pulled the soft cherry silk of her kimono around her. "You went down to Roger's office?" she asked Pet. "You funny kid. . . . You'd better look out, Roger will think you're chasing him. He's terribly scornful of girls who run after men."

"I wouldn't worry about that," Pet said with a touch of condescension. She showed no offense at Vergie's criticism; dismissed it patronizingly, as an older brother might have done. Walking over to her sister's dressing table, she scrutinized her handbag: considered it, rejected it. "Don't think I'll get one like that," she stated composedly. Then she reverted to Vergie's comment. "Don't disturb yourself about me, old girl. I can take care of myself."

"That's nice to know," said Vergie. She couldn't help smiling at Pet's parade of independence. "How's Frank these days?" she asked her.

"All right, I guess." Pet took off her hat, showering raindrops on Vergie's rug.

"What do you mean, you 'guess'? There isn't anything the matter between you and Frank, is there?"

Pet frowned. She tossed back her short hair, brushing its damp fronds from her face. "What do you have to talk about Frank all the time for?" she

asked irritably. "Sure, I like him all right, but he gets tiresome. Frank's just a kid." She left Vergie's room, one hand plunged in her pocket, walking with long, boyish strides.

ii

Vergie prepared to bathe and dress. As she went through the methodical operations, she found that her dejection was being succeeded by a disquietude no longer hopeless and unreasoning—a disquietude which prompted action. It was, she saw plainly, her duty to save Roy. She must think, not of herself, but of him.

Slowly she adjusted her dress of dull red silk, a soft luxurious fabric. It was important that she should look her best tonight. In the delicate ways which her love would teach her, she must rescue Roy from the mediocrity of his environment. When a man loved deeply, with his whole soul, there were no limits to the influence which the woman could exert over him—and Roy needed so little to make of him a person worthy of sharing her life. Just at first there would be things—Vergie pushed aside the thought of difficulties. The depressing memory of the afternoon tea she refused to admit to her mind.

She sat calmly before the mirror of the dressing table, hesitating over the big comb which emphasized the triangular shape of her face. She rejected it in favor of simplicity. Above the clinging, rosy gown,

her face was translucent as a smooth crystal. The dark eyes were clear; and Mrs. Stilson, coming to have a look at this disturbing child, breathed out a long sigh of relief. Evidently Vergie had decided not to be contrary.

The Stilson dinner table, stimulated by Roy's high spirits, developed an unwonted animation. Even Mr. Stilson was stirred from his usual abstraction. Perhaps Roy recalled to him some lilt of his own youth, reminded him that he, too, had been an enlivening dinner companion. He waved his slender fingers, revealing a surprising vitality, as he produced from a secret store his stock of anecdotes: "an amusing thing I read the other day" . . . "a good one that a fellow at the office was telling me." Kindled by her husband's enthusiasm, Mrs. Stilson laughed unconstrainedly, without discrimination—her mouth wide and pretty—Pet's laugh.

For an instant their gayety brought an ache of poignant happiness to Vergie's throat. It was a part of her love for Roy, who carried an enchanter's wand, at the touch of which people were transformed. Above the black-and-white of his dinner clothes, his young face smiled at her. It was easy to see him as she had imagined him—subtly changed, with a quality of dignity, reserve, distinction. With this new Roy, life was going to turn gracious, beautiful and kindly. Again she thought of their home, hers and Roy's—the gay times they would have! Theirs

would be a place to which everyone would come—they might enter tired, but they would go away refreshed. . . . Roger, for instance; they must have him often. At first, he might not understand Roy, but he would soon be won over. Poor Roger, she had neglected him. . . .

Roy had invented a private joke with Pet, which consisted largely of significant looks and sly innuendo. A glance from him was enough to send her into helpless giggles. Now he told them: "Not meaning to cast any gloom on a happy family gathering, you want to look out for this little girl. I know a thing or two about her." He assumed the pious, nasal tones of a country parson. "After the collection has been taken, we will sing Hymn Number Five Fifty-four, 'Yield Not to Temptation.' "

Pet, avoiding his eyes, made an effort for control; suddenly exploded into a laugh like a violent sneeze. She leaned toward Roy, preening her head. From his implied suspicions she acquired a sense of prestige which gave her confidence among her elders. She had no need of her defenses of sulkiness and boyish independence. Coquetry was apparent in her. "Don't give me away," she begged Roy. She shook one finger at him, showed one dimple. To Vergie she said, "I wish you wouldn't take Roy out tonight. I like to hear him pull his line."

"Vergie and I are going to paint the town red," Roy announced. He gave Mrs. Stilson a humorous

look of understanding, intended for her reassurance. "I guess I haven't told you, Vergie, Fred Stamm called up just after I got back home. He's taking some girl to the theater, wants us to meet them afterwards, and go to a Russian place to dance. All right with you, isn't it?"

It seemed to Vergie that anything Roy proposed must be all right, even a party with Fred Stamm. Dinner over, Mrs. Stilson went to look out of the window at the damp pavements.

"I don't know," she told Vergie. "It might come on to rain again before you get back. Going to that Russian place, so late and all. Maybe you better take an umbrella. . . ."

"Not under any conditions an umbrella," Vergie said. The rich fabric of her evening wrap caressed her arms and shoulders. She twitched Roy's coat sleeve, eager to go—to be alone with him.

Mrs. Stilson sighed, resigning herself. Her glance strayed from Vergie's face to Roy's; a handsome pair. The situation, after all—in spite of inclement weather and late hours—had much to recommend it. "Be careful walking on those high heels," she instructed her daughter. The warning restored to her a sense of her rightful authority, her position as director of her children's affairs.

"I'll have been in bed for hours by the time you get in," she said to Roy. "But not asleep," she added hastily. She was anxious that there should

be no confusion on this point. "Not asleep till I know Vergie's in."

iii

The click of the closing door was the sign of their release. In the silent hallway outside the apartment, Roy's hand clasped Vergie's, and she raised her face, a fragment of fine porcelain. Her eyelids drooped, and, in the dimness of the hall, the face seemed to float before Roy, fragile, unlighted. He gathered her close in his arms, burying his cheek in the soft fur of her wrap. Time ticked past, as though measured by their quick heartbeats. Then he laid his lips over hers. Out of the darkness, she clung to Roy. She was sinking, but he held her.

She felt too bruised for passion; her need was rarer, more intimate and exacting. It was a need which cried for satisfaction of the mind, the spirit, for a subtlety of comprehension, perhaps unrealizable. But she was grateful that Roy had passion to offer her. Their bodies understood each other. Vergie escaped the suffocating darkness, drawing strength from Roy's desire. Their eyes met in a long embrace.

Nothing, Vergie resolved, must mar this evening's pleasure. Relentlessly she subdued the claims of her own mood, forcing herself to be vivacious. In the theater she tinkled light laughter at the jests. By degrees her animation became genuine. The

color and crash of the spectacle began to intoxicate her; her dazzled mind turned to a dizzy pinwheel, spinning in her head.

Roy had arranged the meeting with Fred Stamm and his girl, and Vergie waited in the taxi while he found them. Fred was the first to appear; his pink well-kept snout thrust itself through the taxi window with a jovial grimace. A faint odor of expensive alcohol came from his lips as he greeted Vergie. He lifted into the taxi a tiny, fair girl in a green and gold turban.

"Vergie, meet Madge." Fred sat down heavily between the two women, drawing an arm of each through his own. "Roy'll be along in a minute. And how's the little college girl been since our last meeting? This lady you see before you," he told the fair-haired one, "is a terrible highbrow. You want to be careful not to pull any bones in front of her. She'll print 'em in her magazine."

Madge looked frightened. "Don't listen to him," Vergie said, reassuringly. "He likes to make fun of me. We women will have to stick together." Her words, almost coaxing, made an overture of friendliness to Madge, with whom she felt she might establish at least the community of sex.

Roy jumped on the step of the taxi, giving the order to the driver. "Well, this is a nice state of affairs," he proclaimed, as he saw Fred Stamm's

comfortable position. "Knife a fellow in the back while he's off working his fingers to the bone to give you happiness." He collapsed in ironic despair on one of the shelf-like folding seats. In his hand he held a large paper bag, which he extended to them with a gesture of magnanimity. "Peanuts," he said. "Always thinking of others, that's me all over."

His mouth moved in a rotary, convivial grin, as they helped themselves to his peanuts. "What do you think this is, the circus?" Fred Stamm roared at him.

"Sure, it's a circus. Haven't we got a clown?" Roy said, taking off his hat with a low bow to Fred.

"We certainly have, as long as you're here," Fred assured him. The small fair girl laughed in a shrill treble. The peanuts had served to break the tension of their meeting. Vergie was grateful for the small occupation of cracking the shells, and abstracting the nuts from their coating of red skin.

They slowed into a line of motors before a lighted doorway, and soon found themselves in the cabaret. Fred Stamm had reserved a table against the wall, and the four of them seated themselves on the long bench behind it. Around them chatter arose, vague and swirling, as though borne on the writhing smoke of the cigarettes. The narrow room was fringed with tables which fluttered with men and women. To Vergie they appeared as a restless flux of color,

and she permitted her eyes to be distracted by their vivid flicker and stir. As her excited senses caricatured the scene, she found the dresses of the women sumptuous and extraordinary; their faces were segments of animated enamel. Their escorts seemed jerking mannikins in black clothing, the somber background for this study in chromatics. On the walls of the room garish paintings of Russian peasant life displayed gestures cruder, bolder, scarcely less unreal than those of the people before them.

In Vergie's mind the pinwheel circled giddily. The spectacle had only the semblance of reality. These were not actual people, not even Roy, not even herself; but marionettes, cleverly fashioned and operated. Vergie thought that she alone had apprehended the disguised mechanism. Her perspicacity elated her. Drawing her lipstick from her bag, she surreptitiously brightened her mouth.

Madge, catching sight of this, followed her example. "That's right, doll yourselves up, girls," Fred Stamm instructed them. "Don't imagine you're getting away with anything, though—not with Uncle Freddie around. Uncle Freddie doesn't miss what is commonly known as 'a trick.' Say, this place is all right, though, isn't it? Suit you, Vergie?—if I may be permitted to address you thusly on such short acquaintance." He sat back with a fat smile of gratification, as the musicians exploded into jazz.

Couples slipped from the tables and began to dance. The reel of color became swifter, magical.

Two Mexican girls had come in, their eyes heavy with cosmetics. They wore sinuous dresses of black, and around them were wrapped shawls burning with embroidery of brilliant flowers. Their escorts, dark and amorous mice, drew them from their seats, and they began to dance, adapting their languorous movements to the rhythms of the jazz. The enticement of their wheeling bodies held Vergie's attention. She was rapt in observation of the show. As yet, it had not occurred to her to think of herself as a part of it.

iv

Fred Stamm had led Madge to the crowded strip of dance floor, and now Roy pulled Vergie gently by the hand. In the conventional touch of his arm at her waist, she sensed a pressure, a caress. Subtly she felt herself transmuted from a whirling brain to a vibrant body. The giddy pinwheel in her head released itself, encompassing her. Now she was herself the pinwheel.

"Look who's here," Roy's voice startled her. He directed her attention to a party of people who had just entered. One of the men, a miracle of flawless grooming, was observing Vergie with a bland smile. She waved her hand to Mr. Twill, as she and Roy danced by. Louis Bayard was in the party, too;

but his back was turned as he helped one of the women with her wrap. To Roy, who had seen Mr. Twill on several occasions in the office, the incident was a source of keen amusement.

"Can't get away with a thing, can you?" he inquired. "And Heaven will protect the working girl." he quoted cheerily.

The surge and whine of the music awoke in Roy and Vergie an increasing delight. They moved closer to each other as they danced. On the crowded floor they were no longer two distinct people, but two aspects of an entity. Vergie was pervaded by the intoxicating nearness of Roy's body. Her eyes were almost closed. It seemed that she was light as air, a feather, unsubstantial. She would have believed herself incapable of exertion. Yet her body danced on without effort or volition.

When they returned to their table, Fred and Madge were already seated, absorbed in each other. Roy cast a glance at them, dismissed the necessity for considering them. He drew near to Vergie, his eyes searching her face. She felt his gaze hold and quicken her, like an ardent embrace; scarcely she dared raise her eyes to Roy, surrender to him even the warmth of her silence; for it seemed that, with an answering look of passion, some blinding lightning must flash between them.

Roy's hand closed over Vergie's, pressing the fingers so that the tips pulsed.

"I adore you," he said. "I'm mad about you." His madness sent a new quiver, electric through her hand. "Do you think it's queer I haven't asked you to marry me? Do you, Vergie?"

She felt her eyes stretch wide in her face. "Do you, Vergie?" Roy insisted. His voice was thick and urgent. But she couldn't answer him. A weight lay on her tongue and lips.

"I have to have you," Roy cried out. "Sweetheart, Vergie, you belong to me. I can't bear to think of any other man touching you. . . ." His mouth contracted suddenly. His face went fluid, rippled with emotion. He twisted Vergie's hand so that the bones cracked; and there came a moment of silence. The waiter approached their table, and bent solicitously forward while Roy and Fred ordered. Why did she feel that this was a moment's grace, Vergie wondered? She knew that she wished Roy wouldn't speak. Words were tiny arrows, poison-tipped. It was safer to riot mindlessly in color and rhythm.

But Roy went on. "Vergie, now you must understand—after this afternoon. That's one reason I wanted you to come home, see Mother—so you'd understand."

Vergie's mind cleared sharply. Of course, she could think now! Mother! That was it, the thing she had been forcing out of her consciousness. Yet, somehow, now that she remembered, it did not seem

important. Roy's mother was uptown, safely shut in her apartment. Roy was at her side. What else mattered but this young Roy? She saw his flushed, manly face; and his mouth, at once resolute and vulnerable.

v

The waiter laid the table unnoticed, for Fred and Madge, too, were aware only of each other. "You must have seen how it was with Mother," Roy said. He looked down at his plate and frowned. "She's sick, really. Nerves, you know. And Mertie's thirty-four. She's been engaged for four years." He looked at Vergie, and she shook her head, slowly, pityingly. Her heart ached for poor Mertie, grown ladylike with long waiting. "At first she was so happy over it. I'm not sure now. . . . Waiting so long seemed to spoil it, somehow. Mertie isn't so young. . . . Sometimes she's been discouraged, and talked about giving him up. But I wouldn't hear of it. It's been terrible for the man, too, with Mother feeling the way she does. He's been crazy to marry her right along. He has a good job, bought a nice little home in Detroit. . . ."

"In Detroit?" Vergie asked. Her voice was a flute, a thin trickle and drip of sound.

"Yes," Roy said, "Detroit. That's where he lives. Didn't you know that? That's why Mother feels so bad . . . so far away . . . losing Mertie. . . ."

Echoes of his voice shot in and out of her mind, shut off, sounding again, like an interrupted phonograph record.

"You couldn't get married right away, you mean?" she asked. The jazz had begun again. Its loud whine split the air, above the shuffle of feet. They were aware that Fred and Madge pushed back the table, calling back to them as they stepped on the dance floor. Yet no sound seemed to touch the silence which hung, a shining crystal, between them.

"No," Roy said. "No, not right away. In a year or two, when Mother's more used to doing without Mertie. . . . Any change upsets her so—the idea of bringing a new person into the house. . . ." Beneath the blare of the music, Vergie heard her brain chattering. A new person . . . into the house. . . . The words tore a ragged track through her. She wanted to scream, laugh, cry. . . .

She put one hand over her eyes, shutting out the lights, the flash and flicker of the dancers. Of course, she would have had to live with the old woman! She had never thought of that. She had gone blindly on, confident in her love. "You fool," Vergie gasped into her shaking fingers.

vi

"It seems to me deplorable that you're too absorbed to notice old friends. . . ." The voice, drawl-

ing and artificial, came to Vergie's ears from an apparently great distance. Mr. Twill was standing by the table. He drew up a chair, and bent his waxen perfection upon it, with an easy and slightly feminine assurance.

"Rather an amusing place, isn't it?" he demanded of them. In Mr. Twill's vocabulary "amusing" was in high repute: a safe adjective, which commits one to so little. "Rather like Paris. Rather smart."

His bland presence calmed Vergie, like cooling water. It proclaimed the importance of a suave exterior. You couldn't, she remembered, be cheap and theatrical. It wasn't done—at any rate, not in public; not before Mr. Twill. Though a flame seared you, you didn't acknowledge it. You, too, must pretend that you were molded of cold wax. . . .

"You'll forgive my intruding, Peck"—he inclined so elegantly to Roy that it would have been an inconceivable social blunder not to have forgiven his intruding. "I'm sure you won't mind my asking Vergie for one dance. In view of my paternal relation to her—my paternal relation," he repeated the phrase archly, with a glance which interpreted the preposterousness of his words. "Sweet as a June rose in that red dress," he told her.

The music crashed to a close and the weaving couples moved to their tables. As Fred Stamm and Madge came up, arm in arm, Vergie felt a poignant embarrassment. She was confused at the idea of

presenting Fred Stamm to Mr. Twill. If it had been possible to avoid the introduction by some ruse, she would have done so. But there wasn't any escape.

"Glad to know you," Fred Stamm bawled genially, and his paw closed over Mr. Twill's fine white fingers. Fred's pear-shaped face was ruddy, his thick neck lay over his collar, like a purple sausage. Madge nodded to Mr. Twill with an affected giggle. Would he think she was her friend, Vergie wondered? Shame pierced her sharply. When the bright whang of the music again rent the smoky air, she quickly rose. "Come on," she said to Mr. Twill. "Our dance." Roy she scarcely noticed. Some action, some swift change were essential to her. She was in deep water, half asleep. . . . But you must keep moving or you drowned. One solace she felt; the moment with Fred Stamm and Madge had been interrupted. Her eyes sought the table where Louis Bayard sat; he turned with his sudden quizzical smile to the lady beside him, a porcelain lady in black, with pearls. He, too, must have seen her companions.

The whirl of the dancers, the bang of the music, disturbed her. Mr. Twill gyrated with automatic perfection. It became preposterous to Vergie that they should be moving around the floor, two people holding on to each other, wriggling their feet—why were they doing it? Perhaps they couldn't help it. She decided that they couldn't help it. The spec-

tacle, of which she was a part, was directed by a powerful mechanism. They were all marionettes, which some crazy force jerked, jerked so that they must go on dancing. . . .

Mr. Twill left Vergie at the table, where Roy was waiting for her. The dull color still smoldered in his cheeks; but his passion had vanished.

"Vergie," he said, "don't run away from me again. You're hurting me. . . . I know there's something wrong." He was confused, but eager to straighten things out. "What is it, dear?" he asked her. "You're going to be willing to wait for me, aren't you, Vergie?"

Her eyes regarded him curiously, and she felt it scarcely credible that a few hours ago she had confidently expected to change this man, subtly and delicately to mold him into her life. Why, you couldn't do that to people! How had she imagined that you could? How had she thought she could divorce Roy from his family, even from his friends —from Fred Stamm, whose fat laugh made her stir uneasily in her seat. . . .

When she spoke, her impersonal words presupposed that he had followed her thoughts. "Can you imagine me living with your mother?" Vergie asked him. Somehow, speaking in that detached way seemed to simplify it. "Can you?"

Roy looked away. He did not answer.

"Can you imagine me taking care of that plant?" Vergie's voice grew higher, rose to a reedy laugh. But the laughter was stuck tight in her throat, swelling it—she couldn't laugh hard enough to get it out. Roy's head was still turned away, and he made no sign.

The whole thing was so pitifully second-rate! Like colored motion pictures, little scenes appeared before her eyes. There was Vergie watering the plant . . . there was Vergie entertaining at dinner, Harriet, Brace and Roger. . . . Mrs. Peck was telling them about her nerves, her gas, her lost Mertie . . . there were people dropping in for tea, informally, unexpectedly . . . slices of lemon, nicked around the edge. . . .

It grew easier to laugh; hard, indeed, to stop. "Oh, Roy," Vergie appealed to the back of his head. "Can't you see it's funny?"

vii

The room had fallen into a hush; and, perceiving this, Vergie saw that a woman had stepped forward. She stood between the tables, and a stringed instrument sounded a note of expectation. Her black hair, parted in the middle, was drawn, smooth as licorice, into a tight knob on each ear. Great gold rings hung below the knobs, and a rope of gold clasped her tawny throat. She wore a peasant blouse and

a red skirt, with a gay apron. Her lips were parted. She began to sing.

Her dark voice throbbed in a slow cry of pain through the cigarette smoke which lingered above the half-consumed dishes on the small, rectangular tables; and the chattering people were silent, as though half-unconsciously they realized that the woman's suffering was more important than anything they might have to say.

It seemed to Vergie that she could not endure the anguish in the woman's voice. She had loved and suffered. She, Vergie Stilson, had loved, too. Yet she didn't suffer, now that love was over. She felt empty and indifferent. Across the room she saw the Mexican girls. Their faces seemed heavy and scented, like magnolia blossoms. They leaned against their lovers. These were women who knew the depths of love. Vergie had an instant's perception of the trivial and self-interested emotion she had dignified by that name. These women would stop for nothing, once they loved. They would have fulfillment, ecstasy, while she was dissuaded by the ghost of an old woman, whom she might push aside, nullify. . . .

Still the singing voice cried passionately. . . . Ten days of happiness. What a fool! How cheap it was to hope; this would teach her the end of that. This would teach her not to take love seriously, believe

it the answer. Her disillusionment was complete now.

Roy moved at her side. His face turned to hers; its look of hurt caught at her throat. In his eyes, near which tears trembled, she saw his boyish soul, lacerated a moment ago by her laughter. He didn't speak, but she knew she would remember the reproach, the anguish of humiliation, the disappointment of his eyes. As though she could enter Roy's mind, she suddenly understood. She felt in her own heart the frantic pain of his kindly nature which had been stabbed sharp and deep in the love which he offered, devoted, unsuspecting.

And what was Roy's offense? Just common humanity, that was all. Tenderness stirred in her side, her hand could have started toward him. He was dear, dear! But the bright essence of her was cold, resolved. Whatever happened, she mustn't be trapped in second-rate surroundings. Her hands, clasped tightly, remained motionless on the table.

"You didn't love me," Roy whispered. "You were just playing with me. You never loved me." His eyes searched her face in an agony, longing for disproof of his incredible words.

The still room shook into motion and applause, as the song ended. Fred Stamm leaned forward and called, "Hey, Vergie, how'd you like that pathetic little ballad? He was her man, but he done her

wrong, what? Listen, the next time you trip the light fantastic with me, understand?"

Vergie had a vision of herself pirouetting around the room, a tangent to Fred Stamm's stomach. Not that, not that! Roy was sitting forward at the table, his head between his hands. There was despair in the bend of the shoulders, the back of the neck—under his ears, the skin was pink. Tears, hot and painful, swelled Vergie's throat. "I can't bear it," she cried to the chattering room. She rose from the table, pulling her wrap about her.

They released themselves from the importunate Fred and reached the dark street. A taxi drew up beside the curb. "Don't come with me," Vergie begged Roy. She knew that her resolve would be defeated in the close quiet of the taxi. She must end this suffering tonight.

"It's all over?" he asked her. In his broken tones sounded the last eager trace of hope. "You don't love me?"—he implored her to deny his words.

"It's all over," Vergie told him. She felt she must go on talking until he believed her fully; she must convince him at once, while she had the courage, here in the dark street, beside the waiting taxi. "I don't love you, Roy. It was a mistake. Oh, I'm sorry. . . ."

"Never mind," he said at last. "Never mind, dear. It's all right. I want you to be happy, that's the

most important. . . ." His voice faltered, and he put his arm around her. "Kiss me once more," he said. She raised her face, silver-cold, to his tortured, tear-wet mouth which still exuded faintly the cheery, brownish fragrance of peanuts.

III

CHAPTER VIII

i

Pet rose from the breakfast table, where an egg-stained plate and milk-smeared glass remained to mark her passing. She went into the living room, whistling cheerfully.

"Whistling girls and crowing hens," her mother reminded her; but the admonition was perfunctory. Whistling, though unladylike, was a symptom of good humor, and Mrs. Stilson's mind would have reasoned, had it been prone to analysis, that persecution should be reserved for the abnormal, the tormented. She raised her head alertly, as Vergie entered the dining-room.

"Aren't you going to take any cereal?" she asked, hovering over the table. Her presence snapped tensely on Vergie, turned the dining room into a trap.

"No," Vergie said, "I don't care for cereal."

"You don't eat enough," her mother complained. "Never ate enough from a child. Coffee and toast. That's nothing to do a day's work on. Don't you feel good? What do you look so white for? Circles under your eyes. . . ."

"I'm all right," Vergie said. If she had raised her voice, it would have whistled in a thin scream. She gulped a mouthful of coffee, scalding hot.

"That dress is a disgrace. Wonder what you'd say to me if I went around in an old dress like that. You're usually so particular. I don't know what's come over you lately. . . ."

The trap snapped tight, snapped tight. Crisp fragments of toast trembled in Vergie's fingers. She concentrated on the business of eating them, examining them attentively, swallowing them suddenly with a sip of coffee.

"I don't know what you do with your money." Mrs. Stilson's tones implied suspicions of a secret vice. "You never have a cent, with all you earn." She sat down at Pet's place, crumbed it thoroughly with her fingers. "Hear anything from Roy?"

The question quivered slowly down over Vergie, a stinging lash. Yet, it was better to have it asked; easier than waiting for it, dreading it. "No," she said. "No, I haven't."

Her mother looked at her covertly. "I should think you'd miss him," she said. Her effort to be casual, to speak lightly, gave her face an expression of wiliness. "Seeing so much of him there for a while. You were just good friends, weren't you?"

"That's all," Vergie said. She heard her voice clink, light and chill, like shattering glass. It echoed maddeningly in her mind, "That's all. That's all.

That's all." She put down her coffee cup, rose blindly from the table. "I have to hurry downtown," she said. "Get my work done. This noon I'm going to the hospital to see Harriet. . . ."

ii

Yet, once she had escaped to the street, she could not face the office. She was unstrung. Sitting at a desk would be unendurable. From the telephone booth in the corner drug store, she called Miss Aronson. "I won't be in this morning. Tell Mr. Twill I went to an exhibition or a decorator's—oh, tell him anything." She replaced the telephone receiver on its hook and, still grasping it, she stood for a moment in the narrow, airless booth, her eyes closed. Then, walking carefully, as if she were something fragile, which motion might injure, she moved up the street. Her agitation required an objective, a diversion. In a florist's shop, she purchased an armful of pale roses; then she turned her steps toward the Good Shepherd Hospital. She would go to see Harriet this morning.

Her dread of this visit she had scarcely confessed. But, calmed by the methodical exercise of walking, she admitted it bleakly to her mind. Of course, in a city crammed with hospitals, Harriet would choose this one to have her infant in!

The door was open, and beyond it in the white entrance hall, the pretty, fair-haired girl sat at her

switchboard. Was this, thought Vergie, all she had feared? She had been stupid and cowardly to dread coming to see Harriet, because of the associations of this hallway—which was just like every other hospital hallway. There, in the corner, was the small reception room where she had waited, her eyes on closed double doors at the end of the corridor. But Vergie quickly dismissed the thought of the double doors. . . . There a baby had drowsed and yawned, sliding its soft mouth. Uninteresting memories! But they made poignant the recollection that she had been happy, happy. . . . Better say foolish, foolish! "Foolish, foolish," Vergie repeated mechanically to herself.

The cage of the elevator, commodiously designed for stretchers and operating tables, received her; and out of the blank corridor she entered Harriet's sunny room. Harriet lay against her pillows, drained of color, yet possessed by some opulence of life. She pushed back the covers to disclose the baby at her white breast; and her wan cheeks stirred in a smile of contented pride.

Brace was there, his eyes constantly wandering to the bed. He was trying, without signal success, to look accustomed to being the father of a son. Vergie cooed the customary blandishments; but the sight of Harriet hardened her with resentment at the absorption, the utter complacency of motherhood.

The baby ceased its eager sucking, and Harriet lifted it up. Vergie bent dutifully over its warm, milky fragrance. And, her face close to the ugly, squinting scrap, she felt her mood abruptly change. Her emptiness filled with a mounting liquid, as warm as milk. Why, you had to take care of a baby! If you left it to itself, it would squirm and yap a little and then die, quite helplessly.

"Isn't he sweet?" Harriet was asking her. "He's going to be a very handsome boy," she purred. Brace had bent over the baby, too; but now he turned courteously to Vergie. "How have you been?" he asked. "I think you're looking rather tired."

Vergie's thoughts went swiftly, defensively to herself. Her throat tightened at Brace's sympathetic tones. Tired? Yes, she was tired. She tried to recall the aspect of her fine triangle of face, which it seemed that she had not seen for a long time. Behind her was a white-painted bureau, with a large mirror.

"I suppose I do need a rest," she said. With elaborate nonchalance, she turned to glance in the mirror. Then she leaned forward, scrutinized her face.

In the glass, back of her own image, moved the reflections of Brace and Harriet and the baby. But Vergie didn't notice them. They were outside the focus of her attention.

Her first emotion was one of disgust. This

couldn't really be her face! It had altered since last she had looked at it with attention. While she had been occupied with other things, it had grown older, sounding no alarm. She had been accustomed to thinking of her face as young, because it was fresh and dainty and unmarred. She had pitied other people, whose faces grew tarnished, wore out. Never had she conceded that such a thing could happen to her—at least, not for ages, not until she was an old, old lady.

How foolish she had been! No one, of course, could escape. Vergie saw now that time was a grim, vandal hand which delighted in marring freshness. This hand had moved over her face, rubbing it soft and inelastic. It had smudged the corners of her eyes, and her mouth. And this was only the beginning! The hand would never tire of its work. It would scratch ugly scars in her smooth skin, it would pull a criss-cross of tiny lines around her eyes. It would pluck at the flesh under her chin, tearing it loose and flabby.

The horror she read on her mirrored face made Vergie laugh. The laugh improved things. It set a flickering light behind her eyes. Why, it wasn't necessary to have a face like that, blank, empty as a small white cup! This was her own fault, her own stupidity. She had swept herself clean of feeling, being afraid to suffer. She had been absorbed in protecting herself. But better suffer any depths of

pain than bear a strained face, which had lost hope, together with feeling. . . .

She had forgotten to care about her looks! . . . No woman ought to make that mistake. She wouldn't be old! Defiance burned in her. There was nothing so important that she would grow ugly and hopeless over it. Twenty-eight wasn't old! She wasn't beaten yet. Above everything else, she wouldn't admit that picture of herself—Vergie, the faded, the unlovely, an object of pity. But the eyes in the reflection were transformed now. A faint flush had risen in the cheeks. The lips were parted, eager.

"How much longer are you going to look at yourself?" Harriet's voice sounded reproachful. "We don't think it's a very polite way to act when you're calling on us. My son feels he's neglected. Is it nice of Aunt Vergie?" she appealed to her son.

"It's all Brace's fault," Vergie said. "He reminded me of my face." She thrust her finger into the baby's hand. Suddenly she bent over and kissed the tiny hand rapturously. Then, she drew her finger away. "I want to use your phone a minute, do you mind?" She searched in the telephone directory. There it was: the House of Youth.

A suave voice floated through the receiver of the telephone, the voice of the House of Youth. It told Vergie that a client had that minute canceled an appointment—if she cared to come in an hour? . . .

a most exceptional opportunity. So many people snatching at youth, Vergie thought; but she had an exceptional opportunity. It seemed propitious.

She straightened her hat at the mirror. Beauty came high, but it was worth any price. Gentle-eyed, she smiled on Harriet, seeing in her now a tender picture of mother-love. A white-capped nurse entered the room, putting out her arms for the baby. Her starched, impersonal kindness suggested duty, rather than devotion; and Vergie felt touched by Harriet's reluctance to give her baby up.

"Good-by, dear," she said. She hesitated, regarding Harriet's pale face critically. "Be careful not to let yourself go. Women with babies have to be so careful. You want to watch out . . . cold cream every night." She kissed Harriet fondly, and hurried from the room.

iii

The bus would have taken her downtown conveniently, but the urgency inside her wouldn't permit of jogging in a bus. She was too eager to be after beauty, catch its flying skirts. Signaling a taxi, she succumbed to a crisis of impatience. She was maddened by every delay, resentful of the intricacies of the traffic.

Yet after all, she was more than half an hour in advance of her appointment, and some diversion must be devised for the interval. Vergie paid the

taxi driver, and began to walk briskly down Fifth Avenue. She would find an errand on which to spend her time. Stockings, perhaps—you always needed stockings. At the wide entrance of a department store, she turned in, and made her way through groups of lingering shoppers to the hosiery department. A sale was in progress at a long table placed in the center of the aisle, and Vergie joined a press of hawk-eyed bargain seekers. She picked up a pair of the inexpensive stockings, examining them critically.

"Are these seconds?" she asked the sales girl.

"Yes, they are. They all have slight defects." As she spoke, she turned toward Vergie, gradually disclosing a long purple scar, which ran brightly across her cheek.

Vergie looked away from the girl's face. Its grotesque disfigurement hurt her, stinging her mind with irony. "Why, she's a second, too!" Vergie thought. "She was botched in the factory . . . a slight defect." She put down the flawed stockings, and walked hastily away from the bargain table. At the counter, she demanded the best, the extra-fine quality of hose. "You are sure these have no defects?" she insisted. The sales girl, a superior blonde, moved the fine silk over an electric bulb, sunk in the counter, to show her that the stockings were perfect. As she waited for change, Vergie looked surreptitiously back at the sales girl of the

bargain table, who was patiently continuing to dispose of her damaged wares. Why, she, Vergie, was in the same class with that girl! "All women of twenty-eight are seconds," she said to herself. "They belong on tables in the aisles, not with the regular stock . . . even if they've come from the factory in good condition. They're marked down, because they're shopworn, slightly soiled. . . ."

"Your change, Madam," a voice reminded her sharply. She took the coins, and, abruptly conscious that she was late, ran from the department store. Dodging the passersby, she hurried up the Avenue, until impetuously, with trembling knees, she gained the entrance to the House of Youth.

iv

In a reception room of coral and faint gray, she was aware of the elegant women who sat awaiting their turn for admission to the shrine of beauty. The girl at the reception desk greeted her. "Miss Stilson? Just a minute. I'll take care of you at once."

On a dark oak table near the desk, several objects, carefully arranged in a case, awakened Vergie's interest. These were three small pieces of glass, iridescent with the strange blues and greens of long burying in the earth. A typewritten card explained that they were phials for cosmetics which had belonged to a woman of Phœnicia more than two

thousand years ago. At her death they had been buried with her for use in the next world.

Vergie's contemplation of the exquisite bottles was interrupted by a voice. A girl in a white uniform, as trim and professional as Harriet's nurse, was speaking. "Quite ready, Miss Stilson. Will you follow me?" Vergie mounted a flight of velvet-padded stairs, and entered a doorway which the girl indicated. She found herself in a small room, the walls of which were paneled in pale green. Beneath a lavender-shrouded lamp was a reclining chair, covered with lavender linen. But to Vergie the most fascinating thing in the room was the table which stood beside the chair. It was a hospital table of glass and white enamel, and on it was arrayed a bewildering collection of bottles and boxes and jars.

"Will you take off your dress, Miss Stilson, please?" said the girl. She left the room, and Vergie slipped off her black dress in the lavender-tinted quiet. It fell from her like a symbol of old despair, and she rose before the long mirror which faced the reclining chair, already a more hopeful Vergie, in her white satin slip. Everything in the room amused and pleased her. She fingered the red lacquer boxes and trays on the shelf beneath the mirror. The lilac radiance of the room was like light shed through a bottle of hair tonic. It was like undressing in Grant's Tomb, Vergie thought, hanging her dress on a convenient hook, and feeling gratified, rather than

depressed, at the idea of undressing in a tomb. She skipped over to have another look at the table. Those lavender-stoppered bottles, those sturdy jars of cream, each stuck with an amber spatula, were to have their part in creating a new Vergie.

The door opened and the white-clad girl came in, smiling professionally. She bore a large lump of ice and a bowl which contained a steaming, thick mixture. These she deposited on the table, and proceeded to arrange towels and cushions on the reclining chair. Vergie looked on, sensing the hush which heralds important events. The girl performed her duties ceremoniously. "Th' inferior priestess at the altar's side," Vergie repeated to herself. She felt that she was about to assist in ancient and significant rites—but yes, "the sacred rites of pride."

The girl helped Vergie to put on a loose linen garment, and bound a towel tightly about her head, tucking in the stray spirals of hair. Vergie lay down on the chair, with one eye cocked on the mysterious preparations with which the table was covered. What was going to be done with the bowl of cereal? She wanted to ask questions about everything on the table, but the girl seemed so impersonal and efficient that her curiosity was rebuked. A bottle, its stopper removed, was filling the room with a piercing fragrance.

"Put your arms down," the girl said authoritatively. "Flat at your sides. Don't cross your feet.

Just try to relax. We get the best results if you're altogether relaxed." Vergie straightened on the long chair; but her eyes would keep rolling toward the table, where the girl was busy. A great, sopping piece of cotton was in her hands, and now she laved Vergie's face and neck and shoulders with a scented lotion. Vergie gave a sigh of deep contentment. She must send Harriet here as soon as she was able to come. . . . Slowly, the girl distributed over Vergie's face the hot contents of the bowl, a mealy soft mixture which soothed and quieted. In time, it was succeeded by a pungent oil, and the girl began to slide her hands in rhythmic, caressing movements over Vergie's face and neck. Vergie ceased to be a mind, she was clay now; she was the plastic stuff out of which beauty is made. Under the gliding palms and fingers, she felt herself being formed to loveliness. She pulsed with their gentle slap and beat, lulled by the fragrant rhythm. She could have slept, sinking, sinking lusciously into a warm bath of gently lapping waves. . . .

The massage ended, and Vergie opened her eyes, blinking in the lavender light. She was a piece of linen, ironed after long crumpling—pressed flat and smooth, beautifully smooth.

"How long can you put off having wrinkles?" she asked the girl. She kept the anxiety of her suspense shut in her mind; none of it must mar the freshly laundered face.

"Forever," the girl answered firmly. Her tone was positive. She saw no need to elaborate her statement beyond the single word.

A spatula laden with flower-sweet snow completed Vergie's awakening from the drowse of the massage. Though her eyes were closed, her thoughts were weaving busily.

"Arms at your sides, please," the girl admonished her. "Complete relaxation gives us the best results." Vergie put down her arms, but she couldn't stay the thoughts. She was pervaded by a conviction of the value of the ritual she was celebrating, and it seemed to her that at this moment she was close to some burning secret of life. The significance of the culture of beauty startled her; and she thought of the parable of the man who was given one talent. Make the most of yourself! You heard that advice everywhere. History and philosophy contained it. Once they had believed that even death couldn't dispel beauty; and women were buried with their cosmetics near at hand, for the moment when they should be needed. Vergie was touched by the thought of a girl, lying dead by the blue sea two thousand years ago. Someone stooped to place by her cold fingers a tiny flask, fragrant with the dye for her eyelashes.

Two thousand years ago! The Phœnician girl's beauty was a dusty dream, yet the symbols, eternal,

endured to evoke her. Two thousand years—how long, long ago! And she, Vergie, was alive. Beauty seemed a light, passed from hand to lovely hand, down the years. No matter how tiny the flame she had received, it was her duty to tend it faithfully.

She grew conscious of a spreading, aromatic coldness which smelled of balsam forests. Then the slippery congelation of ice slid over her face. She unclosed her eyes languidly while the girl finished her ministrations. A trace of rouge was applied to her cheeks, filmed with the spicy dust of powder. Her lips were touched to a faint rosiness. Vergie sat forward and searched the mirror. There, reborn, was a new face.

She gazed on her own calm loveliness, on the dark depths of her quieted eyes. This face was made for courage; smiles would come to it readily. Doubts and confusions and disappointments had been smoothed away. She could think now of things she had forced her mind away from. It was possible to analyze that mistake of loving Roy, that romantic, ill-founded impulse. She saw clearly that a woman caught by her emotions loses the ability to use her intelligence.

Life would solve itself somehow. She would take care that she came to meet it, well equipped. Just this cult of her own appearance lent a reality and vista to living; it offered an ambition toward which each day could rise. For days must have their

climaxes. It was unthinkable to endure a dreary succession of them, without the ascent of expectation.

Vergie picked up her old black dress, and put it on with distaste. All her clothes should be new and pretty.

"Would you care to have one of our beauty sets for home use?" the girl inquired, indicating a sample box of lavender tin. "Each contains a booklet of instructions for the care of the face. They are most complete in every particular. . . ."

"Yes," Vergie said. "I will take one." She turned her head, to observe the pearly curve of her cheek. Her eyelids drooped with self-approval, an affectation of disdain. The face of a vain lady at her dressing table!

Was she, Vergie questioned, the woman of the woodcut which Roger had given her? Absurd idea . . . yet with some tincture of truth. A woman's care for her appearance wasn't a thing to be ashamed of, laughed off. That was another foolish survival of Puritan training. Vanity, to use the popular word, was a kind of shining armor; and no one could afford to laugh at armor in a world of darts.

With the beauty-set under her arm, she tripped down the velvet-covered steps to pay the girl at the reception desk. And her eyes resting for a moment on the Phœnician girl's opalescent bottles, she saw herself going forth, Vergie the resolute—the well-preserved, unwrinkled Vergie—clad in bright armor to do battle against the world.

CHAPTER IX

i

THE next morning, Vergie rose a half-hour earlier than usual, in order to have time for the operations prescribed in the booklet which accompanied the beauty set of the House of Youth. In the dining-room her mother was, she knew, awaiting her; but the thought of a breakfast inquisition held no terrors for her this morning. She began the conversation herself.

"I'm going to buy a new dress," she told her mother. "Did I tell you I was going to have dinner with Brace tonight?"

"About time you had something new," Mrs. Stilson said grimly. She did not seem gratified by Vergie's concession to her ideas. Her face wore an expression of suppressed irritation, and now and then she glanced at Vergie out of the corners of her eyes. But Vergie had about her an air of well-being; her face wore no look of strain. A faint hope that her first-born was going to be happy again, instead of tormenting her poor mother with that white, empty face, stirred in Mrs. Stilson. She determined to put Vergie to the test.

"I suppose you didn't hear from Roy, did you?" she inquired with conscious lightness.

"No," Vergie said. "Not a word." She spoke cheerfully, a little absently. The eyes she raised to her mother were clear, she smiled with untroubled lips.

Mrs. Stilson's heavy face relaxed. "I guess it wasn't to be," she said resignedly. As she looked at her daughter, she drew a deep breath of relief. Vergie was all right this morning! Well, then, that was better. No need to poke at people if they weren't suffering, trying to hide it from you. . . .

"I hope you get something real pretty in the way of a dress," she told her child dubiously, not ungraciously. "You have such outlandish taste sometimes," she went on to say; for her dignity demanded that she should not appear entirely mollified.

ii

The new dress was a pleasantly provoking idea to Vergie, and her excited anticipation increased, as she hurried from the apartment, and caught a bus. The commission was too important to be delayed. She hadn't given any thought to the shop she would visit; but, as the bus rolled down Fifth Avenue, she found herself enticed by many elegant windows. In one there were three hats, all blue and lovely. Vergie pressed the button wildly, and slid down the little winding stairway of the bus which, most con-

veniently, was prematurely arrested by traffic. The hats drew her irresistibly. One of them, she knew, was to be hers!

She ran across the street to the shop, and pressed her nose against the glass, like the child outside the pastry shop. On closer inspection, the blue hats were ravishing and, though she hadn't until the moment of seeing them intended to buy a hat—all the more gloriously, *because* she hadn't intended buying one—she dashed into the shop at once.

"I want to see the hats in the window," she cried to the early morning quiet within. Mlle. Anna, slender in black silk, her hair discreetly advertising the advantages of henna, came forward to greet her, quite as though she were giving a party and Vergie were one of the guests.

"I must see all of them," Vergie told her firmly. "A great need for a new hat has come to me," she explained to Mlle. Anna.

Poised and tolerant, Mlle. Anna produced the hats. One, of a subtle shade—"an expensive blue," she called it, and there seemed no reason to doubt the accuracy of the description—she deftly slipped over Vergie's head. Vergie caught her breath. She saw her delicate triangle of face bloom piquantly under the low curve of the hat; a black wave of hair was smooth over either ear. Her heart beat quickly. A new hat, a lovely hat! It was a moment of throbbing emotion. Vergie tried to keep back the

smile which twitched at her lips. She was ashamed to see it break through, a child's artless smile of undisguised gratified vanity.

"The hat is too *ingénue,*" she protested to Mlle. Anna, to counteract the effect of the smile. "It's all right for a flapper. But a woman of my age. . . ."

Mlle. Anna registered a bored distaste for references to age. "No one could take you for a day over twenty-two," she assured Vergie. "You aren't more than that, are you?"

"God love you," Vergie said. She was absorbed in studying her reflection. She was pretending to hesitate; but no earthly force could have kept her from the hat. An emotion for it had been aroused in her; she desired passionately to possess it. She would have fought for the hat.

"Well," she said to Mlle. Anna, speaking slowly as though her decision were gradually solidifying, "I might as well take it." She continued to gaze at the charmed vision in the glass.

"You won't want another blue hat," Mlle. Anna said coolly. "But I have another one here—just the thing for you. A soft green, with gardenias. . . ."

The presumption of her! But there was something pleasant in thinking that Mlle. Anna had studied your type, and discovered what would suit it. Vergie suffered the small blue hat to be removed, and a wide green one, of fine straw, to be placed in its stead. The picture was transformed, at once.

She was a different person, though hardly less delightful. The green hat gave an impression of exquisite, garden-party dignity. Vergie rolled her eyes, and looked at herself, her mouth drawn a little to one side, trying to appear dissatisfied. Well, of course, you couldn't always wear the same kind of thing. It was an experience enriching to the character to have different kinds of hats, for in them you were actually different kinds of people. Many hats were a moral necessity, really.

"Yes, I'll take this one, too," she said. She was no longer the naive child of the blue hat, but her slightly supercilious older sister.

She took off the green hat and laid it with the blue one. Two hats at once! Gorgeous, drunken extravagance! Large families undoubtedly could, and did, live for weeks on what those two hats cost. She sat, one knee crossed over the other, swinging her slim foot in an ecstasy of pleasure.

Mlle. Anna had disappeared, but presently she returned. Something lay in supple folds over her arm, and Vergie saw that it was a blue dress. Was she going to have the impertinence to suggest? . . . But, of course, you did need a dress. . . .

"I know you're going to love this little frock," Mlle. Anna began. With quiet assurance she led the way to a fitting room, and began to raise Vergie's skirt, preparatory to slipping her black dress over her head. "It goes perfectly with the blue hat. It's

a model, but I can let you have it for a marvelously low figure. Its name is *Le Sentier de la Vertu,*" said Mlle. Anna, giving a very creditable imitation of French. "The Path of Virtue," she translated for Vergie's benefit. "Isn't it adorable on you?"

The Path of Virtue was constructed of thick, soft silk, made with a cunning affectation of simplicity, in two shades of blue. It was a most demure dress, with a wink in it; and Vergie realized that, while wearing it, she would find it difficult to be anything but demure—with a wink. There were long dull blue streamers with which to tie in the loose sleeves at the cuff. Vergie could almost have chosen the dress for the sake of those thick, sophisticated streamers. There was something entirely engaging, too, about the soft band which tied around her waist. What a difference clothes made! Vergie wanted to jump and sing in the Path of Virtue. The newness of it, the faint smell of dye and the unblemished folds and the sheen of the material filled her with elation.

"I could be pretty and good and charming if I could have a new dress every day," she thought. "Or even every other day," she conceded, trying to be reasonable.

Mlle. Anna went to get the blue hat, which she slid again over Vergie's head. "You see it's exactly the shade of the lighter blue in the dress—of the streamers and the trimming," she pointed out. "A

very trying shade for most people. With your wonderful complexion, it's perfect."

The tribute to the contents of the lavender tin box of the House of Youth completed Vergie's gratification. "Second blooming," she told herself, turning to get the full effect of her costume. "Well, what of it?" A lamp was shining behind her eyes. She was a radiant person in the new dress and hat—a butterfly Vergie fluttering out of her chrysalis.

"Blue is rather a tiresome color," she told Mlle. Anna. She tried to stick up her nose at the idea of blue. "It sounds so uninteresting. But the lines are beautiful. . . ." There was no use struggling. Vergie was bewitched. Just to give up the dress and hat for the space of the day was a cruel wrench. She took them off reluctantly, leaving them with Mlle. Anna, in order that minor alterations might be made. Mlle. Anna vowed that she should, without fail, have everything that afternoon. Even the amount for which she must write a check didn't make Vergie wince. Money didn't matter. She eyed with disgust her old dress of black cloth. It lay on a chair dejectedly, as though conscious of its age and disrepute. Two days ago, the black dress had seemed all right. It was unsuited to enshrine a radiant Vergie. She hustled it on, with a mental resolution to discard it that very night. It seemed to her unjust that a bright and recently blue-clad being should have to don drab black and hurry to an office.

"Will there be anything else, a little evening dress?" Mlle. Anna had the impudence to ask.

"Another time," Vergie told her, as elegantly as the black dress would permit. She almost ran down the street and into the Roquefort cheese lobby of the office building. She had spent so long in making her purchases that she might be later than Mr. Twill. But Miss Aronson shook her head, in response to Vergie's inquiring eyebrows. "Not yet," she informed her laconically.

Vergie sat down at her desk, feeling, like a physical weight, the chains of routine. She looked around the room, at the plastered walls, the light oak furniture, Miss Aronson's red hat on the clothes tree. This cramping office must soon give place to larger areas. For the moment, until this brief phase had worn itself out, she must rise above her stupid surroundings. Life surely stretched ahead in a succession of silver days, filled with new dresses, new hats—Vergie, a butterfly of ever-changing wings.

iii

Conscientiously she tried to abstract her thoughts from herself, and turn them on her neglected work. The desk was piled with correspondence which she had to answer for Mr. Twill, who hated to dictate. He preferred to make a simple penciled notation or to explain briefly to Vergie the tenor of the replies to his letters.

"Rather a jolly, friendly note—you know the sort of thing, my dear, I needn't tell you. Man-to-man letter. . . ." Mr. Twill had passed the letter over to her, looking at his finger nails as he did so. Vergie could always be sure he was looking at his nails, when he stiffened his fingers, the tips slightly raised. . . .

Miss Aronson, who had been engaged on a little detective work in the filing cabinet, came languidly forward to take Vergie's dictation. She was wearing her hair parted this season, brought down flat and uncurled, and twisted into a knob on each ear. The changes of the mode had for Miss Aronson a keen interest. From the flux of fashion she drew inspiration for daily living—it constituted her artistic expression, her woman's caprice and her emotional outlet. She sat down by Vergie's desk and, like Mr. Twill, studied her finger nails. But her technique of contemplation was different from his. She bent her fingers, turning her hand palm upward, and regarded upside-down the small heart-shaped slabs, painted with gloss, like dried pink glue.

Vergie was drawn to Miss Aronson, a sister soul. "I bought some new clothes this morning," she confided to her. Describing her purchases was more important than the man-to-man letter. She pictured them graphically, even making sketches of the hats and the neck of the dress. Only once did Miss Aronson interrupt her.

"Is that your own color?" she inquired, scrutinizing Vergie's face.

"Certainly not," Vergie told her. "Out of a box. It's a paste—from the House of Youth, you know. You use a little vanishing cream first. . . ."

Vergie finished the sketch of the blue hat, and Miss Aronson sat forward to examine it, her lips parted, her finger nails forgotten.

"Must be lovely," she murmured. "I bet you look swell. Some class." Her eyes were shrewd and appreciative. There was even a flattering hint of envy in her gaze. "You been wearing that dress an awful long time," she told Vergie. She ran one proprietory hand down her own slender cylinder of tan cloth. "I'm getting a swell evening dress made. That new yellow. . . ."

Their faces, dark and smooth, were close above Mr. Twill's letters. Understanding, sympathy lighted their eyes. The interest which they passionately shared had drawn them into eager communion. The significance of personal adornment invaded Vergie's mind. People should speak with reverence of clothes—they were important, emotional experiences; character-molding forces. Clothes were symbols. The opalescent bottle of the Phœnician girl—that was a symbol, too.

It was half-past ten, and Mr. Twill entered the office. Vergie began to dictate.

iv

Gradually the pile of letters was exhausted and Vergie went to sit by Mr. Twill's desk, attendant on his whims. He was feeling spirited and energetic, because he was going out of town for several days; and a desire to leave everything in perfect order animated him. Leaving everything in perfect order meant transferring it from his desk to Vergie's. By five o'clock she sat behind a towering mass of proofs and manuscripts and correspondence.

At last, Mr. Twill was ready to go. "Be a good girl while I'm away," he said to Vergie, as he went out. "And don't work too hard."

"I won't," Vergie assured him. She could have pushed him out of the office, so eager was she to be off, to reach the apartment and inspect her purchases.

"Have my things come?" she called to her mother, as she opened the door. There they were, safely reposing in her own room. The hats sat in their boxes snugly amid clouds of tissue paper; but the dress had been placed on a hanger which depended from a lighting fixture. Vergie grasped the psychology of that at once: hung up to avoid wrinkles, hung openly to be on display.

"Like them, Mother?" she asked.

Mrs. Stilson stood in the middle of the room, her face dubious, though not displeased. "Lovely," she said; yet her tone carried reservations. She was

silent for a moment before the reservations forced their way out. "*Two* hats?" she asked, with a compression of the lips. "Don't tell me what you paid for them," she requested.

"I won't," Vergie assured her. "But aren't they beautiful? Wait till I try the blue one on." She drew it from its tissue nest, and pulled it down over her black hair. Mrs. Stilson smiled, pride trembling on her face. It could be seen in that moment that this mother and child resembled each other, after all. "Becoming," her mother admitted to Vergie. She offered a further concession. "I saw in the paper that blue was the latest thing."

Vergie, quickly making ready, slipped luxuriously into the new dress. From the doorway, her mother peered at her. "Anything new?" she inquired. The question was her formula of curiosity about Vergie's personal affairs. "Yes," Vergie said. "Everything new." She laughed suddenly, smoothing down the thick silk over her breast, her arms. "Everything new!"

It was time to leave for dinner with Brace. As the elevator descended, Vergie heard a familiar voice in the hall below. "Come, Princey, come!" It was, she recognized with a little chill, the voice of Mrs. Nordlinger. There wasn't any escape. And what need she fear, anyway, this new and armored Vergie? She stepped from the elevator, face to face

with Mr. Nordlinger. At the doorway, his wife still coaxed her Prince.

"Well, well!" Mr. Nordlinger was, as ever, cordial. He gripped Vergie's hand, surveyed her admiringly. "How's our literary genius these days? Seems to me we're looking pretty dressy. Mama, see who's here."

Mrs. Nordlinger came elegantly forward, her eyebrows lifted.

"Well!" she, too, said; but on her lips the word was changed to a delicate cooing, as sweet as honey. "You're quite a stranger. I've said to Mr. Nordlinger several times: I wonder, I said, where Miss Stilson is keeping herself." She laughed a little, to finish off her sentence. Her eyes appraised Vergie's dress.

Vergie stirred into gracious animation, chatting lightly about her work, her social appointments. Within her, she heard a protest at such cheapness. . . . But pride makes insolent demands. "Just dashing off to dinner," she explained.

"I caught a glimpse of Royden last evening," Mrs. Nordlinger said. "He hasn't much time for his old auntie. Always busy—a host of friends! He was looking *so* well." There was her family pride to consider, too.

"Roy always looks well," Vergie said. She heard her tones clack; dropping, counterfeit coins.

"Nice boy," Mr. Nordlinger put in. He took his cigar from his mouth, by way of lending emphasis to his point. "Always liked Roy. He has a hard time, too. His mother's a mean woman to live with"— Mr. Nordlinger's head wagged confidentially —"stands in his way. Dreadful trying woman. I always told Mrs. N. her brother made a mistake the time he took her. She shortened his life, if you want to know what I think."

Over his cigar, which he held suspended near his mouth, ready to be lipped again, he looked shrewdly at Vergie. For an instant, she almost imagined that one eye winked at her, ever so slightly. Mrs. Nordlinger smiled primly, with eyes downcast, in polite deprecation of any criticism of her sister-in-law. But Mr. Nordlinger was too genuine a person to be bound by the tenuous skeins of ladylikeness. He had had his say.

"Tell your mother I shall see her soon," Mrs. Nordlinger bade Vergie, in farewell. She bowed, her head a little to one side. "Come, Muvver's boy," she called to Prince.

Vergie made her way across town with a new lightness of heart. Mr. Nordlinger's sympathy had been curiously warming. She was glad to be dining with Brace. As she rang the bell of the apartment, she told herself that something new, something amusing, was sure to happen. Her small blue hat she laid carefully on Harriet's bed. The

room, though meticulously neat, seemed neglected without Harriet. Intimate possessions were missing. Things had been tidied, displaced and dusted, and Harriet hadn't been there to give them a look of use again.

v

Brace was dressing, the maid had told her, but a tall figure rose as she entered the living room. "Roger!" Vergie cried. She felt a pang of real affection at the sight of him. "I haven't seen you for ages. It isn't right—we mustn't ever let it happen again."

She smiled affectionately at Roger, and his dark face brightened, as he pressed her hand. But almost at once he relapsed into a gloomy abstraction. He turned away, beginning to finger a book on the table, with a discontented air.

Men gave themselves up to their moods like children, Vergie said to herself. To the inexperienced woman, this practice must often be disconcerting. A woman of the world, a woman of practice and discernment, knew how to deal with men. She understood how to be tactful, how to woo a man from his melancholy preoccupation by her sweetness and gayety. She never asked what was the matter. She behaved as though nothing were the matter. Presently, without realizing how it came about, the man found himself in a good humor again.

Vergie sat down in a blue taffeta chair, letting the streamers of her cuffs slide along the arms. "Look, Roger," she said. "I match the chair. Isn't that amusing?" It was not, she felt, such a clever beginning for the deft woman of the world to have made. But it had been the first thing which came into her head, and its spontaneity must excuse it.

Brace strode forward in the soft light of the shaded lamps, to welcome them with apologies for his tardiness. He was captivating in his rôle of host; yet, as she admired him, Vergie realized how little idiosyncrasy he had. It was difficult to find anything to describe about Brace. He was the average man, glorified by good breeding. His manners were so agreeable that one forgot to think how really uninteresting Brace was. A phrase from a yellow-backed grammar knocked at Vergie's memory: "Politeness is the oil which lubricates the wheels of society."

There was real distinction, as winning in its way as cleverness, in his graciousness, his ability to put people at their ease. And Harriet was like that, too. They were well-mated, happy in their life together. Vergie felt respect for Brace and Harriet, who had chosen each other wisely, as befitted people of intelligence. You had to think, in taking an important step like marriage, of the next day, the next and the day after that—the long years stretching ahead. Yet even apparently intelligent

people were often led blindly by physical attraction, by nebulous qualities like boyishness. . . .

"You're looking very beautiful tonight in that blue dress," Brace was telling Vergie. His eyes rested approvingly on her. And, smiling up at him, fluttering her eyelids deprecatingly, Vergie saw Roger, who stood behind Brace, still absently turning the leaves of a book on the table. His dark profile, which just missed being sinister, was more interesting than a merely handsome face.

vi

At dinner they revealed themselves as three pleasant people, who had much to say to one another. Though she couldn't honestly attribute the change to the operation of feminine tact, Vergie was glad to see Roger free himself from his guarded mood. He seemed to shrug himself out of it, like a dog shaking moisture from his coat. The sourness of his mind lent piquancy to his conversation; or so it seemed to Vergie, who admired sourness. She thought that Roger, such a funny, morose person, was really much like herself; more like herself than anyone else she knew.

The elegant small dining-room reawakened her desire for a home, for possessions. She should be presiding over her own candle-lighted dinner table, fragile with flowers and pale glass. Her dress was pretty, it gave her a kind of self-expression,

but it was not enough. Vergie longed to extend the sphere of herself, clothe herself, not only in dresses and hats, but in backgrounds, a fitting environment. She must make an end of office work, and the dullness of its routine. However, she was prepared to lay her plans wisely and deliberately. She had learned the folly of snatching at cunning life, which so easily slipped through your fingers.

When dinner was over, Brace left for the hospital, to spend an hour with Harriet. "Don't go away," he entreated them. "Stay comfortably here as long as you can. I'd love it if you'd wait till I get back."

Vergie, who did not want to appear over-anxious for effect and who knew that things may be overdone, had gone to sit on the rose-colored couch. Anyway, even if the couch didn't match her dress as the taffeta chair did, she felt that its rich color set off her hair most effectively. But she did not appear to be thinking of this, as she poked the feelers of her finger tips into a bowl of spring flowers, caressing the petals lightly.

"Roger," she said, "Harriet and Brace are charming people, aren't they? Don't you think they're wonderfully alike? They seem so well suited, they have so much in common."

From the easy chair where he lounged, Roger frowned uneasily at Vergie. His moodiness had returned with Brace's departure; decidedly Roger

had something on his mind. He gnawed at the inside of his cheek. "Don't you think so?" Vergie asked again.

"Yes," he said at last. "Brace and Harriet are happy. But it doesn't always work, this marriage of similar types. I've almost made up my mind that the attraction of opposites is more than popular cant. . . ."

"You always laughed at it," Vergie reminded him. She took a cigarette from a glass box on the table, and Roger came over to light it for her. "Attraction of opposites!" she laughed at him. "One of your favorite targets."

"I know," Roger said. "I know. You live to believe in a lot of things you've laughed at." But he seemed to derive no pleasure from the mutability of human philosophies. He remained standing in front of Vergie, looking at the blackened match which he still held in his hand.

"There's something rather quaint and sentimental about you this evening," Vergie told him. "This isn't the Roger I used to know. What's the trouble, are you thinking of getting married or something?"

Roger glanced at her sharply. "What makes you ask that?" he demanded. But Vergie was pursuing her own thoughts.

"I've just had an experience," she said. Her head was bent, and her words slipped out gently, stepping lightly on this experience, which was still

so raw and new, which hadn't been spoken about before. "I thought I was in love with a man. Roy Peck. You never met him, did you?"

"No," Roger said. "I never did meet him. I've heard your family talk about him." He bent forward, his face drawn, attentive.

"That experience has taught me a lot," Vergie went on in a small, chill voice. "I had—what people call 'love' for Roy Peck. I wanted him, I wanted to be happy with him. But our life together would have been terrible. We weren't alike, don't you see? Our minds, tastes, didn't match, never could have matched. It was impossible. . . ."

"Too bad," Roger said. His voice thickened with regret. "I hoped you were going to marry that chap."

Vergie put out her hand, feeling for Roger's. She pulled him close to her, and persuaded him by a soft pressure to sit beside her on the couch. She kept her hand over his while she spoke. "Roger," she said, "do you think I'd get myself engaged without telling you? How could you think that? We're such good friends. I've always been fond of you, I know you care for me. . . ." Her glowing face was close to Roger's. Her eyes held points of light.

Roger pulled away his hand, and reached for a cigarette. A long minute passed while he lighted

the cigarette, and puffed on it twice in silence. At last he turned his face to Vergie.

"Hasn't Pet told you?" he asked her.

The phrase might have seemed meaningless, had it not been for the tension of Roger's silence, for the sharp furrows which he held between his brows. "Pet?" Vergie asked, her face puzzled. "Something about you?" Her face slipped, rearranged itself in a new pattern, like a star in a kaleidoscope. "Not something serious? Roger, what do you mean?"

"I asked her to marry me." He spoke in a strained voice, like a voice heard through a bad telephone connection. "I suppose you'll never understand it, Vergie. I'm crazy about her." He reddened slowly, painfully.

Vergie gave a sudden laugh. "It's the funniest thing I ever heard. Roger, the antiquated bachelor, the woman hater—and that baby. I never guessed. But, of course, I see it all now—the attraction of opposites!" She laughed again, enjoying Roger's confusion. He was hanging his head like a small boy. Her words came out, tripping and dancing, with the stream of her laughter. Sometimes it was hard to speak and laugh naturally, but this was the easiest thing in the world. And, of course, she was immensely amused, though she couldn't realize it all just yet. It would take time to savor the richness of the jest. "I might have known you were having a romance with some flap-

per, but I never imagined it was in my own house. That deceitful Pet. . . ."

At last a sense of obligation returned to her. "I'm awfully happy about it," she told him warmly. "You must forgive my thinking it's funny. It will make us better friends, won't it? You'll be my brother." The points of light sparkled in her eyes. "Fun to have a brother."

Roger looked at her eagerly, his face glowing. He flung his cigarette into the fireplace, and took both her hands in his. "Vergie, it's wonderful of you to say that. It makes me so happy, really, you can't know."

vii

Even the most charming of brother and sister episodes cannot be sustained over a long period. As this one was drained of its first enthusiasm, Vergie began to think of going home. Maybe Roger would come with her. But, of course, he would!

"Let's go home," she said to him. "Pet's there." She could have laughed again at the idea of taking Roger home on account of Pet. But it was only the newness of the idea which made it funny; she would be used to it soon.

She grew more used to it, on the way home, while she tried to draw out the reluctant Roger, as shy of questions as a school boy. She couldn't resist

calling as they entered the apartment. "Pet! I've brought a friend of yours to see you!"

Pet came out of the living room, invulnerable, debonair. She wore a dress of soft pink silk with flutings of white organdy; a little girl's party dress. She giggled composedly, as she looked at Vergie and Roger.

"You must have had a big evening," she said. "Home at half-past nine. What's the trouble, did Brace bore you?" Without self-consciousness she took Roger's arm and dragged him into the living room. At their entrance Mr. and Mrs. Stilson moved receptively in their easy chairs, raised their eyes behind spectacles, put down the evening papers. Pet pushed Roger down on the couch, and seated herself beside him.

"Nice time, daughter?" Vergie's father asked her kindly. She wondered if there might be a hint of pity in his tones. After all, he must think it strange. . . . Nodding an enthusiastic assent, she sat down on a footstool near his chair; she looked small and vague, though her eyes were bright.

"Too bad to slouch around in your good dress," her mother conveyed to her soundlessly, with grotesque mouthings, emphasized by movements of the head. But Vergie gave no sign of comprehension.

On the couch, Pet moved her face close to Roger's, flashing on him the green fires of her eyes. She

laughed; a flavored cream puff, sweet and soft to bite. Roger was painfully aware that Vergie was watching them. His rôle of the flapper's sweetheart was causing him an agony of diffidence. But it was evident that he couldn't escape. He was the willing sacrificial lamb, trussed for the slaughter.

"We've been seeing a lot of Roger while you've been stepping out so much," Pet called to Vergie. "Haven't we, Rodgie? We like Rodgie. You're my sweetie," she whispered the last words audibly to her victim. "Aren't you?" she asked him, giggling. "Aren't you?" she persisted, leaning closer to him. Roger nodded, ever so slightly, but his eyes were fond: an old man's indulgence.

"He's in his second childhood," Vergie thought. "It's the pitiful breakdown of a good intelligence."

She looked up at her father's face. In his eyes, too, as they rested on Pet, was indulgence. Her mother's face was complacent as she gnawed back a doting smile. They were the pleased parents. Before them was love, warm and happy. Their baby was only eighteen—a sigh for that! But one must accept things. Roger was a good match, a steady, clever lawyer. There Pet sat in her pink party dress, already successful, established, on her way to making the conventional step forward. Why, they were enchanted with the whole thing! Vergie pinched herself, trying to understand it. She had been missing all this. She had been so

preoccupied with her own affairs. . . . No one had had time to tell her. No one, in fact, had thought of telling her.

Her father rested his hand on her shoulder with an affectionate pressure. Good God, what was he thinking? Vergie's throat tightened. She was humiliated by the suspicion of pity. Yet she could see herself quite plainly. The older daughter, not so far from thirty, left at home, while one of her admirers was carried off by the pretty baby of the family. Vergie drew a deep breath. The air of the room was growing thin, choking. . . .

But Roger's endurance broke first. He whispered to Pet, and she turned to the others. "We're going out for a little moonlight walk," she told them. Won't be long. Come on, Rodge." She hung on his arm, smiling up at him, her juicy red lips raised. In the hall the sound of their laughter might be heard. There came a moment of utter silence before the door slammed.

Did Pet, Vergie asked herself, have so much to offer? Pet was a nobody, a pretty little fool. Why, she was Vergie—brilliant, lovely! Could she be made light of by a little girl's brainless coquetry? By luxurious lips, as soft as a cushion? Like hell she could. . . .

She rose from her footstool, patting her father's hand as she moved away. "I'm going to retire to my own apartments," she told her parents elabo-

rately, "to rest and make ready for the morrow's work."

In the mirror of her dressing table she saw the soft blues of the Path of Virtue. Her mother came to the door, apprehensive, anxious to be reassured about her child; curious, anyway, and determined to ferret out the worst, if reassurance were impossible. But her face calmed as she saw Vergie's eyes which gazed with pleasure at her reflection.

"Well, was it worth it?" she asked. Vergie's eyebrows interrogated her from the mirror. "Throwing your money around," her mother explained.

"Worth it? I should say it was." Vergie raised her arms above her head. "Worth anything in the world. Worth everything." Her tones grew ecstatic, mystical with conviction. She felt the necessity for lyrical expression, for the support of a symbol. She pointed to the woodcut which hung on the wall.

"See that woman, Mother? A splendid likeness of me. It's a lucky thing, too."

"You must be crazy," her mother said darkly, "comparing yourself to a naked woman. I never could see any sense to that picture." She hesitated, looking from Vergie to the woodcut. "Don't get queer," she entreated her daughter helplessly.

CHAPTER X

i

VERGIE made her way through the crowded lobby of the hotel. It was one o'clock, but Dannet Holden had said that he might be five minutes late. Remembering their telephone conversation that morning, she repressed a smile. She had insisted on his breaking a business appointment in order to meet her; and he had, she realized, found her sweetly unreasonable persistency most flattering.

"But I just have to see you, Dannet," she had said. "No, nothing special—only that I haven't seen you for so long. A woman's impulse. Indulge it, will you?" The wire had sung quietly for a moment, while Vergie could picture the mollified smile which her words had brought to Dannet's sheep-like face.

"Well, of course" . . . he had said. "When you put it that way, Vergie, what can a fellow do?"

Vergie sank comfortably into the cushions of a broad couch, and scanned the faces about her, the faces of the people who had come to lunch at the hotel. The women she quickly dismissed, except for a cursory observation of some detail of dress or appointment. The men she examined keenly.

Many men, nearly all young, were assembling in the lobby of the hotel. Their types were diverse; but, almost to a man, they looked alert, brisk and prosperous. On each Vergie sat in judgment. One she approved for his well-set head and shoulders; another she frowned on because of his pepper-and-salt suit. But these judgments of hers weren't to be taken too seriously, she reminded herself. They were, after all, neither important nor final—merely small prejudices of her own.

Vergie's thoughts went back to Dannet. If she didn't know him, if she suddenly saw him here in the lobby, standing with that group of strangers, how would she feel about him? Of course, Dannet did look like a sheep. But was he worse than other men? The average of male beauty was surprisingly low. There, for example, was a monkey; a nice, attractive fellow—still, unquestionably, a monkey. Vergie sat forward, twisting her head to peer at his companions. One of them had a sharp, muzzled salesman's face; the face, it was clear, of a fox. The other, more reserved, kept his own counsel behind a blunt, sleepy-eyed feline mask. Now a pink porker joined them. It was—why, of course!—Fred Stamm. Vergie fastidiously turned her gaze to the other side of the lobby.

There she checked off a goat, a tapir and a rhinoceros, while a chipmunk, bearing a brief-case, almost tripped over her feet. She began to tire of

her game. It was plainly established that Dannet Holden came out rather well. He was a sheep; a good, mild, woolly creature.

ii

Still, even with this preparation for tolerance, it was amazing to see how perfectly sheep-like Dannet's face was, as he came into the crowded lobby, and stood blinking through the thick lenses of his glasses, searching for Vergie. When his near-sighted eyes discovered her, they watered a little with pleasure.

"Well, Vergie," he bleated. "You were terribly kind to give me this chance of seeing you. I thought you had forgotten all about me." His self-esteem had been agreeably inflated by the insistent telephone call. It wasn't every man, Dannet felt, who had to smash his luncheon appointments, because a charming little woman couldn't wait to see him.

Under the influence of such heartening thoughts, he approached the head waiter who proved encouraging. "Just a minute and I'll have something for you, Mr. Holden." Dannet looked around, hoping Vergie had heard; that use of his name might impress her. "They know me here, we'll have no trouble getting in at once," he said.

The luncheon he ordered thoughtfully, disclosing an epicurean fancy usually remote from the

midday snack of the hurried business man. Over the small table, he shot his speckless cuffs, as he offered Vergie a gold-tipped cigarette from his case of embellished leather. He was making an effort to be bright and chatty, rolling his light eyes in a fashion which he associated with vivacity.

"Your dress, my dear, is adorable," he said. Flippantly paternal, he even patted the back of her hand.

"Its name is the Path of Virtue," she told him.

"The Path of Virtue! That's a good one!" Dannet gave vent to soft baas of laughter. "That's quite a hint for you, young lady. See that you stay in it, the *path of virtue.*" He drove home his point firmly, determined that Vergie should appreciate it. Like many simple-minded people, Dannet based his humor on explaining to others the jokes which they themselves made. He was innocent about it, and derived much enjoyment from the savor of his own wit; for he prided himself that he could pick up a quip, catch the humor which went over other people's heads, as well as the next one.

"Speaking of clothes," he said, holding out his long arm, "I've been investing, myself. What do you think of this quality? Wonderful piece of wool, isn't it? Just feel it, Vergie." Vergie gingerly fingered his sleeve, gave the proper evidences of appreciation. Thus stimulated, he launched into

a description of the manufacture and importation of this wonderful piece of wool, of its fortuitous discovery by him, Dannet Holden.

The story proved to be a long one, and Vergie's face began to ache from the effort of maintaining an interested smile. She was saying to herself in monotonous little rhythms, "Baa Baa black sheep, Baa Baa black sheep. . . ." But she hadn't asked it if it had any wool. It was offering this recital on the slimmest encouragement from her, and had she guessed what a kind word about the texture of that cloth would do. . . . "Baa, Baa, black sheep" . . . The tale of the wool outlasted the shrimp patties. Vergie prickled with irritation. At first, she might have wanted to cry "Baa, Baa, black sheep" at Dannet, teasingly, even a trifle affectionately. Now she could have shouted it loudly, in ridicule, so that his sheepface should turn red and mortified.

Having exhausted the topic of wool, Dannet went on to speak feelingly of the bond market, touching lightly, yet decisively, on the major European problems and their bearing on the world of finance. How did he ever sell a bond? Vergie wondered. Or perhaps all people who bought bonds were like Dannet. She concentrated on her delicate salad of endive and orange. Dannet ordered well—there was that, at least. By the time that coffee was served, she had nibbled herself into a comatose,

quiescent state. She sat across from Dannet, like a small and sleepy cobra, gorged with food. Inert, she no longer rebelled against his smooth flow of words. She put to herself an age-old question: Why do boresome people seem so endurable, even so good and pleasing, when we do not have to be with them?

A voice spoke her name, piercing her lethargy. "If it isn't old Aunt Vergie!" the voice cried briskly. She looked up to see that little Crump, of the *Good Taste* advertising department, was bending familiarly over her.

iii

"Where did you come from?" Vergie asked. As little Crump shook her hand in his short, energetic paw, she felt as though she had been awakened from sleep. "I was just deciding you'd forgotten all about me." Her words echoed in her mind: the sheep's very phrase! But she mustn't be critical; here was a surprise, an interruption. Dannet was greeting little Crump, and Vergie watched the latter's extraordinarily mobile face. Though he was young, his face was continually splitting into small lines, which readjusted themselves rapidly as his expression varied. His eyes were round, like the eyes of a child on a magazine cover.

"I got in this morning from the great West," he told Vergie, in his confidential way, which made the

most public fact seem a secret. "You'll be over later, I suppose? I want to see you."

"I'll call you when I come in," Vergie said. Little Crump hurried off and, looking again at Dannet, Vergie told herself that he was a sterling person, a good and honest person. He couldn't help being dull, though he did his best with his eye-rollings and chatter. You can't, Vergie thought, with a slightly maudlin sympathy, do better than your best. Yet, an hour and a half of even the most excellent intentions was enough, more than enough. Smiling sweetly into Dannet's light eyes, which were a trifle blurred by the thick lenses of his glasses, Vergie intimated that she would have to be going. Dannet had never seemed so agreeable as in this moment of her escape.

iv

In the office, before removing her hat, she raised the receiver of the inter-house telephone on her desk, first punching the button which stood opposite the name "Crump."

"Welcome home," she cried at the square box of the telephone. A voice came reedily through the apparatus. "Righto! I'll be around at once."

Little Crump was at the door in an instant; he came into the office with an air of wagging his tail. His round eyes were playful. Little Crump owed

his success with the ladies to the fact that he was much like a puppy.

"Let's go in there," Vergie suggested, indicating the closed door of the sanctum. "Then we won't be disturbed." She turned to Miss Aronson with her most business-like manner. "Mr. Crump and I are going to have a chat about the July number," she declared firmly. Miss Aronson nodded wisely; perhaps a shade too wisely, Vergie thought.

Once they were shut in the sanctum, little Crump took Vergie's hand, and jiggled it up and down, as though it were a small cocktail which he was shaking. "Old Aunt Vergie!" he greeted her. It was his favorite joke to pretend this hilariously incongruous relationship.

"You're looking like a million dollars," he said. "It would tend to appear to seem that you haven't been pining away in my absence. I bet you never even missed me. Here I was thinking of you, out in the wilds of Chicago, a lonely boy from the effete East. . . ."

"Yes, you did send me a postcard."

"You got it, did you?" he asked her, with fine sarcasm. "Well, it's good to be back again in this wicked city, as I've heard it called for the last ten days. Wicked, crooked and inhospitable—that's what the Westerners have to say about little old New York. But it treats me all right, I can't complain. Even if you aren't waiting at the train with

a bunch of flowers, you can't escape from me—I ran into you right away. Say, that's rather a nice thing that happened to me today. A fellow I know called me up, Fred Stamm. I was lunching with him this noon. It seems he proposed me for a club he belongs to, the Stragglers. Ever hear of it?"

"Yes," Vergie told him. "I have heard of it." It occurred to her, as she observed little Crump, that his shoulders wouldn't look so sloping if he didn't wear ready-made suits. "Are you going to join?" she asked.

"Why, I guess I will. Pretty good opportunity. Fine bunch of fellows, Stamm tells me. They stick together a lot, have some big doings every month. Aside from the social end of it, they're a good crowd to stand in with. I think I'd be foolish to turn down the chance."

His hands played a sprightly arpeggio along the edge of Vergie's desk. On one finger was a small gold signet ring. His cuff buttons were a light and cheerful blue. Strange, how slight a difference light blue cuff buttons made when considered imaginatively; strange, their poignant importance when actually moving, clear and pottery-bright, before one's eyes. . . .

"Where's Mr. Twill?" little Crump inquired. "Old Daddy Twill," he murmured fondly. "Say, isn't he like something out of a bedtime story? I don't dislike the old boy at that—even if he is kind

of a perfect lady. He isn't working you too hard, is he?"

"Never that," said Vergie. "Though I have something I must do this afternoon. I have to go—why, it's time now!—to see about having some photographs taken up at Mrs. Ira Kemp's. . . ."

"You're keeping swell company these days," little Crump suggested.

"The photographer?" Vergie asked. "Yes, he isn't bad. I'm rather drawn to him. We coöperate most congenially on little morning rooms, little breakfast rooms, little music rooms—I don't know why, when Mr. Twill wants a photograph of a room, it must always be called little. . . ."

"Too bad," he told her with real regret. He was not referring to Mr. Twill's vagaries of thought, but to the fact of her afternoon's assignment. "I'm going to knock off myself, I thought maybe you could get away early, and have tea with me. You know, Vergie, I've been thinking a lot while I've been away. You and I have got to see more of each other than we've been doing lately. Am I right?"

"You're always right," Vergie said. "And if I were you, I'd certainly join that club you were talking about. I think you'd find a lot of congenial men there. . . ."

She went back to her desk and, searching in her purse, discovered a scrap of paper on which a list had been neatly penciled. At the head of the list

appeared the name "Dannet." Vergie carefully drew a line through it, and then a second line, so that the name was most completely erased. A scanning of the list failed to reveal the name of "Crump." She added it at the bottom, for she was a methodical person at heart, and then drew two straight, effacing lines across it, too. She replaced the list in her purse, and started out to meet the photographer at Mrs. Ira Kemp's town house on East Fifty-Seventh Street.

v

The spring air, even in spite of the sunshine, would have made a coat agreeable, but Vergie had preferred not to be practical. She was compensated for the shivers which occasionally ran over her back and arms by the thought that she was attractively dressed. Her spirits gently mounted as she made her way uptown, for it seemed to her that she was approaching her problems in the most sensible and business-like manner.

On the smooth current of her meditations, she reached the newly remodeled entrance of Mrs. Ira Kemp's house. The whiteness of the vestibule was marred by a lanky, lounging figure, which stirred forward as Vergie appeared.

"Why, Mr. Moxie," Vergie said. "The ever-prompt!"

Mr. Moxie's heel ground the butt of a well-con-

sumed cigarette into the floor of the vestibule. As he greeted Vergie, he tossed back his blond tuft of hair, which grew very long in front. His hat had been laid on the case which contained his plates. Mr. Moxie always went hatless in the springtime. It was his way of showing that, in being a photographer, he was also a bit of an artist, an eccentric.

A manservant opened the door, regarding Mr. Moxie's impedimenta with suspicion. Clearly perturbed, he admitted them to the hall, where it seemed improbable they could do much harm, and vanished in search of the housekeeper.

"What's it to be today, Miss Stilson?" Mr. Moxie inquired.

"A morning room," Vergie told him. "And a sunroom. And a boudoir. All very, very small—according to Mr. Twill." The housekeeper descended to them, and led the way to a miniature elevator. They were to begin with the boudoir. Its gracious length— "It's one of the largest boudoirs that anyone could imagine!" Vergie exclaimed—at once aroused the photographer in Mr. Moxie. In the happy, carefree way of the true artist, he unpacked his camera and plates on a rose-colored Persian rug of the Sixteenth Century, and flung his hat and coat on a chair upholstered in valuable and rapidly cracking old glazed chintz.

Vergie perched on the arm of a deep couch, and made suggestions to Mr. Moxie. It was her custom,

though one which Mr. Moxie chose to disregard, to advise him in regard to photography. While she prattled to him, she was making mental notes of the arrangement and the color scheme of the room: items which she might later use in composing captions—something rather light and feminine!—for the photographs which Mr. Moxie would take. She was well aware that her presence was of the first importance; and at heart Mr. Moxie knew it, too. Mr. Twill always made a special point of having Vergie accompany the photographer on his visits to private houses, in order that she might add a social touch; for, of course, *Good Taste* could not be represented by a fellow who threw off his coat in the most costly boudoir, and went competently to work in shirt-sleeves encircled with pink garters.

Abetted by a man whom the housekeeper had summoned, Mr. Moxie was ruthlessly pushing back rugs, dragging furniture about, and looping up ancient chintz curtains. With much skirmishing and a display of lightning gesture, he made three pictures of the boudoir, and pronounced himself satisfied. Order was reestablished under the direction of the housekeeper, who was seen to accept all mutations with philosophy, and they descended to the morning room.

The decorations of the morning room were simple, and Vergie soon made her observations. Mr. Moxie's task was not so easy. The floor of this room was

composed of a fine mosaic tiling, which offered a difficult subject for his art. He shifted his position a dozen times, tossing his blond pompadour with annoyance, thrusting his head at his camera and withdrawing it with a frown of frustration. Vergie began to feel that Mr. Moxie was being tiresome this afternoon in his pursuit of perfection; she yawned secretly behind her hand.

"What's in here?" she asked the housekeeper, who was waiting patiently at her side. They had stepped back from the range of Mr. Moxie's countermarchings, and were standing near a wide doorway.

"It's the library," the housekeeper told her. "Would you care to go in?" Vergie nodded; she would very much care to go in. Softly she turned the knob of the door, and slipped away from Mr. Moxie and his problems. These seemed remote as she tiptoed into a strange, silent room, large and dark-paneled. There were many deep couches and chairs, and the shelves glowed with richly-bound books. The room exhaled an odor of leather, a mellow association of hours of study. Vergie, her feet caressed by the rug, went eagerly to the nearest shelves. Splendid in the twilight in the corner of the room, the books sparkled like somber jewels. She was Aladdin—most beautiful of names. Or Alice! And, now, as she gazed, the books turned to slender flasks, each filled with precious fluid, each labeled, "Drink Me."

Or perhaps this was an illustrious reunion of spirits who welcomed her here in the proud room. Rabelais, Ben Jonson, Fielding, Hazlitt. . . . She greeted them. "Such a pleasure to see you again" . . . Or "I've heard so much about you that I feel, well, really, as if I knew you." Smollett, Francis Bacon, Montaigne . . . Montaigne. She put out her hand—*"Que sçais-je?"*—drew a volume from its place. It gave the faintest squeak as it slid between its fellows. Scarcely breathing in the quiet room, she read a page, luxuriously.

She was startled to hear a shallow, clicking noise, like the turning of the page of a book. It had seemed to be close at hand, the sound of a restless, ghostly presence. The dark dignity of the room seemed suddenly hostile. She looked about her guiltily, as though she had been caught in a theft. Yet surely there was no harm in stealing for a moment the clear, cold phrases of a book?

Her pleasure spoiled, Vergie put the volume back into place. As she turned to leave the room, she saw something which transfixed her. Near the window in the pale afternoon light appeared a brown thing, almost the color of the smooth velvet back of the couch, above which it rose. As she stared, the thing grew recognizable, ceased to be merely a fantastic and alarming shape. It was the back of a man's brown head.

Vergie was shaken by an unreasonable horror at

finding that her fancied solitude was shared with another human being. Her knees were weak, her heart slapped painfully. She could not take her eyes from the head. Evidently the man was so absorbed in what he read that he had not heard her stealthy entrance. Still observing him intently, she took two long cat-like steps toward the door. The head moved, and Vergie jumped with fright. Trembling in the center of the room, one hand raised to her mouth, she felt ridiculous and childish. She was shamed into a pretense of dignity. She wasn't going to be caught sneaking about people's houses!

"I beg your pardon," she began in a small, icy voice. "I didn't know. . . ."

The head gave a violent lunge, and turned around. Simultaneously, its possessor turned the rest of himself, getting up from the couch. He advanced toward Vergie, taking off his reading glasses as he came. It was Louis Bayard.

vi

There was another moment of silence in the big, dim room. Then Vergie sank down on the arm of a chair, laughing helplessly. She was childishly disarmed, her defenses and affectations and flippancies were shattered.

"I'm so glad it's you," she said. "I haven't the temperament for a burglar. Oh, I'm so glad it was your head."

Louis Bayard laughed, too, as he looked at her. His face cleared strangely, as though a light came into it, when he laughed; but he still wore his quizzical frown, one eyebrow drawn up higher than the other.

"I was thinking of you," he said softly. "Is it really you?" He took her hand, pressed it between both of his. "It seems very real," he admitted. "Don't tell me why you're here. Just for this moment, it's easy to believe in a miracle—that my thoughts called you and you came."

"I don't want to spoil any lovely dream," said Vergie. "But that wasn't exactly the way it happened. In fact, I had a terrible moment when I saw you. If I hadn't been such a coward, I might have escaped without your ever guessing I had been here."

Suddenly Louis Bayard laughed again. "I know why you're here," he said. "You came about those wretched photographs. I can hear the racket in the next room. Are they for *Good Taste?* I hadn't realized. . . . Oh, I'm disappointed, it's such a prosaic reason for finding you, like a small blue statue, behind me."

Vergie sighed, remembering Mr. Moxie. "I represent an evasion of duty," she said. "I ought to be in the next room, doing something about the photographs. But, to tell you the inside story of the photographing game, I am not of the slightest

use in it. So I stole away for a minute of relaxation. . . ."

"And to think you might have come and gone, while I sat there thinking of you. How unfair a turn of fortune that would have been! But I prefer to think that our meeting was inevitable, that it was decreed that you should speak to me. *Che sará sará!*" The specter of a mocking smile was on his lips.

"If you had known I was coming, you would have been on the steps to meet me? Or at least in the vestibule? With some very special mark of favor, like a laurel wreath, for instance?"

"With ivory and apes and peacocks," said Louis. "And flowers for you to wear, camellias, I think—those vivid pink ones, with dark, shiny leaves—oh, far too many of them for you to wear, so that you would have felt quite embarrassed. . . ."

"And then what would we have done?" Vergie asked.

"First, we would have gone upstairs while I showed you my study. And then we would have had tea. . . . Oh, it sounds very dull, doesn't it? after the ivory and apes and peacocks."

"And too many camellias," Vergie reminded him.

"Still, let's do it anyway." Louis went to the door of the morning room, opened it wide. In Vergie's absence, Mr. Moxie had completed his work.

The fine mosaic tiling of the floor gleamed undisturbed. The morning room was empty.

"He's gone down to the sunroom," Vergie said. "I ought to go, too."

"Is it really so important? You can look at it on your way out. Let me have my way today." He led her up a flight of stairs to a small room on the top floor. A desk was piled with books and papers. Before the fireplace was spread a small rug, with an intricate pattern of orange flowers on a drab background.

"This is my study," he told her. Her eyes, puzzled, reminded him. "Oh, you didn't know that I worked here? Mrs. Kemp is my sister." Unconsciously, he signaled with a faint movement of his nose that his pleasure in the relationship was qualified. He indicated a photograph on the mantel: an authoritative lady of imperial bust.

"I don't like it here very well," Louis Bayard admitted, eyeing the photograph. "I'm used to my own place and my own things. A horrid confession of age, fussiness. But I have to be here much of the time. I'm having the music room done over for my sister. It will be the best room in the house, by far. Here are the sketches. Light paneling, highly polished wood, you know. . . ."

He placed a chair for Vergie near his desk, where she could see the drawings and photographs, and his

hands fluttered quickly among them. Now, they flew up to adjust the glasses on his thin nose. Yes, they were brown birds, Vergie thought; her metaphor had been apt.

"Do you mind having tea down there?" Louis asked her eagerly. "The workmen will have gone by now. It's rather a mess, you know, but you won't mind?"

Vergie rose, taking a last curious look at the small study. Her eyes rested again on the rug with its sprawling pattern of orange flowers. There was something familiar about that rug. Now, she remembered—of course, it was the Little Jewel! Quite clearly, she saw Mrs. Lutes tossing it up for inspection.

"You bought a hooked rug!" she cried accusingly. "You went back to see Mrs. Lutes?"

"Yes. I did go back," Louis said. "I felt, once I was there, that I had to buy something, so I chose this. It's small . . . and Mrs. Lutes told me that it was one you especially admired."

"And now that you've bought it," Vergie said, "do you like it?"

"I think it's abominable," said Louis candidly.

A step sounded in the hall, and the housekeeper came to the door. "Tea is served in the music room, Mr. Bayard. I've had them put in some comfortable chairs for you."

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In the midst of a litter of polished panels, Vergie poured tea. Two Italian chairs, the low table weighted with heavy silver, the fragile china and sandwiches, the noiseless manservant—it was a tiny island of civilization, ringed with disorder.

"We're Russians," she told Louis. "Just the two of us left. The Bolshevists have wrecked our house, they have even ruined our elegant music room. But we're much too aristocratic to notice. They're firing on us now, but we sip our tea—die politely between bites of a lettuce sandwich." Her words, taking her by surprise, echoed in her mind. Perhaps a fine phrase, that—"too aristocratic to notice." Perhaps more than a phrase. It might be that was the answer, one of the most important answers: to pursue one's own course with a delicate disdain for circumstance, a disregard of conflict, confusion and disappointment. Vergie's eyes, staring at the fat, silver side of the teapot, grew aware of two reflections in it, her face and Louis Bayard's. Grotesquely distorted by the curve of the silver, they yet appeared fine-textured masks, civilized, sensitive, impermeable.

"I have never," said Louis, whose voice seemed to come from a long way off, "been able to talk to you before today. Curious, that. I think that it was because, before today, you never seemed to see me, to be aware of me as a person. I have never

succeeded in passing some strange little block in your mind. . . ."

"I wonder if that could be true?" said Vergie. She looked at Louis, and his eyes seemed to flutter, quick and brown, like his hands. In his whole face was a restlessness, a queer consuming energy, which lived back of the shyness, the vagueness. Now, under her gaze, he dropped his eyes, pressing his lips together. He began to speak, as if irrelevantly.

"I expect to have done with my work here in about two months," he said. "And my book will be out by that time. I'll sail at once for France, just for the summer. In the fall I want to take a southern trip, Spain and Italy—perhaps Greece. But certainly Spain and Italy. . . ." His voice trailed away. He had recited his plans, like a lesson, of the importance of which he was not quite convinced.

They were silent. An awkwardness seemed to have come between them. The manservant had taken his noiseless departure, and they sat alone among the pale, shining panels, from which the afternoon light was brightly reflected. To Vergie the disordered room seemed unreal. It faded from before her eyes. And she saw, instead, the careful magnificence of the streets of Paris. . . . She saw herself presiding in an elegant salon. . . . The flowers were purple and crimson in the squares of Seville. . . . She lay on a terrace at Palermo above the blue sea. . . . Life had become a lovely thing,

of leisure, variety. She, Vergie, had all its best gifts. She was an accomplished person, a writer of importance. She was beautiful, beloved.

Her fingers rested lightly on the chair-arm, and now Louis Bayard's fingers moved down, hovered over hers. She suffered him to touch her fingers, and they lay in his clasp, which was dry, warm and restless.

Vanity, vanity . . . could that be the answer? Vergie wondered in her secret mind. Yet mere vanity of appearance couldn't satisfy forever, there would come a time when even clothes, even a recreated face wouldn't be enough. You had to build on a broader foundation; deliberately construct for yourself the life of prestige and accomplishment which you desired. Never again be misled by emotion, never again be enmeshed by anything second-rate. . . .

And Louis? He had cherished a sentimental passion for her. It had been one of those hopeless passions which might have gone forever unspoken, if it hadn't received encouragement. Then coming upon her today, disarmed and frightened—he had let her see for a moment. Of course, he was out of touch with things. He didn't realize that people weren't doing it that way any more. It wouldn't be hard to show him. . . .

His fingers were on her wrist. "It's a privilege," he murmured, "to know a woman like you, a woman

capable of the beautiful silence of thought. I can feel them rising, your lovely thoughts, like an incense in the room. . . ."

Why, the dear thing, was he as simple as that? Or was there indeed a beauty in her thoughts, the beauty of contemplating the swift, untraceable flow of life? Her fingers pressed his gently, and he raised them to his lips.

And Vergie's heart beat fast with expectation. Again, she was an explorer who stood happy and tremulous before a new world. She would leave the old life: the office, Mr. Twill, Roger and Pet. Already they were taking on the sentimental aspect of familiar things which have passed. . . . She had longed to escape; now, with a graceful gesture, she would take her departure. It was like a story in a book, in which the girl works and hopes and plans . . . and at last her hopes are realized. Except that in a story her hopes wouldn't be realized—not in a modern story. There the girl would simply go on hoping—her dreams would turn to dust and ashes. At the end of the story, the girl would still be in the office, still be chained to the day's drab routine. . . .

Again, Vergie saw in the white silver side of the teapot their reflections, hers and Louis's. Their shining faces, light and elegant, like the polished panels, were in the litter of the room the orderly symbols of civilization. And reflecting on the con-

fusion of living (*Que sçais-je?*) Vergie stretched out her hands eagerly to the next day . . . and the next . . . and the next. The difference between her and a girl in a story lay in the vigor with which she must always question life; that desire for knowing, vivid, incorruptible.

THE END